

DET NEWS: Chrysler scores hit with risky ad

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Eminem's Super Bowl spot creates big buzz; automaker plans more emotion-laden ads

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Chrysler Group LLC and its advertising agency knew their Super Bowl homage to Detroit was a risk.

The \$9 million, two-minute ad starred homegrown rapper Eminem, the city and the Chrysler 200 in a gritty yet poignant tribute that challenged viewers to reconsider their image of Motown.

The tagline: "Imported from Detroit."

"It could have gone either way, because serious and heartfelt is not usually the bastion of Super Bowl commercials," said Joe Stables, a creative director with Wieden + Kennedy, the Portland, Ore., agency that started work on the ad about seven weeks ago.

It went the right way, in a big way.

So much so, the agency said Monday it's working to keep that audacious, emotional message alive in 30- and 60-second TV spots launching this month for the Chrysler brand.

Most will promote Chrysler products more heavily than the Super Bowl spot, which ostensibly was intended to sell the new midsize Chrysler 200.

The next round of ads will feature Eminem's music but not the artist himself.

At Chrysler headquarters in Auburn Hills, a lot was riding on the success of the ad; employees were directed to prepare for damage control if the ad tanked.

There already was advance criticism of Chrysler for making a \$9 million commitment, while it has yet to repay its government bailout loans.

But the ad became the buzz around Monday morning water coolers and on the Web.

Sunday's commercial was a one-shot television event, but continues to live large on the Internet.

If anything, Chrysler was unprepared for its success. Olivier Francois, head of marketing and the Chrysler brand, wasn't even in the United States Sunday.

"We had no idea it would generate this kind of frenzy," said spokeswoman Dianna Gutierrez, who said she was receiving calls, texts and e-mails from strangers.

"It made a positive impact on a national level based on feedback so far."

Comeback stories

More than 2,000 news organizations have mentioned the two-minute gritty reminder of Detroit's rise and fall and determination to make a comeback — as are the rehabilitated rapper and the post-bankruptcy automaker.

"The city and Chrysler and Eminem were all in the same place," said Aaron Allen, who

partnered with Stables in developing the ad.

"All had been great, had a little bit of a fall and now all three are on a comeback."

Eminem was on a short list of Detroit area celebrities identified by the advertising team as potential stars for the ad. He was paid to do the ad; the amount was undisclosed.

News organization links have generated more than 200 million hits. On YouTube, the video had been viewed more than 1.2 million times in less than 24 hours.

In largely unscientific listings, numerous organizations named it one of the most popular ads shown during the game.

Stables and Allen, natives of London and Colorado, respectively, had spent a lot of time in Detroit since Wieden + Kennedy first got the Dodge account more than a year ago.

In their frequent visits, they were struck by the pride they saw in a city the rest of the country had largely written off.

"You literally got to feel their pride," said Stables. And they were struck by the disconnect between the outside perception of Detroit and how the city sees itself.

That became the genesis of the ad that it called "Born of Fire."

"It's the Rocky story," said Allen.

The message resonated across a country that has been through tough times, said Mike Bernacchi, marketing professor at University of Detroit Mercy, whose annual survey of high school students across the country picked it as this year's No.1 Super Bowl ad. The commercial didn't just promote Detroit, it said "Chrysler is back. The auto industry is back. The economy is back. The country is back."

Wieden + Kennedy was originally directed to develop a 60-second Super Bowl ad defining the Chrysler brand that is launching new 200 and 300 sedans and a revamped Town & Country minivan.

But the ad execs kept coming back to the emotions they experienced in Detroit: that the city and Chrysler had a universal story screaming to be told.

"The story of Detroit should be written by, and come from people of Detroit," Stables said. "Other people don't get to define who you are."

Once they latched onto the tagline "imported from Detroit," the story took on a life of its own.

Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne pored over every line of the script and was sold on the idea, Stables said. Marchionne and the board signed off on the ad Jan. 31.

By then, Eminem's role had grown. And so did the length of the ad to a two-minute spot.

There was a lot of last-minute scrambling to buy the additional time during the Super Bowl, said Melissa Garlick, head of Chrysler brand advertising.

Garlick said the Super Bowl offers a unique moment and reach: "It's the best platform to change the way people think about your brand and company," she said.

The ad already is proving its value.

The automotive research site Edmunds.com reported that online traffic checking out the Chrysler brand shot up 328 percent in the hours after the commercial aired, including a spike

of more than 1600 percent for the Chrysler 200.

"Chrysler's ad reaffirmed the company's loyalties to Detroit in an emotionally powerful way, and it looks like viewers responded to that message in a major way," said analyst Michelle Krebs.

Moved by the message

U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, applauded the ad.

"I can't think of a more fitting way to depict Detroit's story than to have fellow Detroit native, Eminem, announce that the city is back and remind Americans that the revitalized southeast Michigan auto industry is brimming with new investment and optimism," Conyers said.

"It should be noted that the city's morale is collectively coming together notwithstanding the economic downturn. This year marks a significant upturn for the city of Detroit, businesses like Chrysler, and residents."

The ad played well in Detroit. Radio talk shows had no shortage of callers moved by its message.

Rappers on the MTV website gave it a thumbs up.

And even though the commercial dissed some of the largest cities in the world, it has played well nationwide including praise on NBC's Today Show for tapping into the growing "made in America" trend and offering a unique twist on Detroit's stereotypes.

"People want Detroit to be successful," said Allen. "Everyone's rooting for it."

Said Stables: "It's a love story from Detroit to itself."