

Self-irony can be very winning.

No one has sold as much fast food as Cliff Freeman. Zillions of pizzas and hamburgers have been consumed due to his efforts. But his commercials for Wendy's or Little Caesar's are anything but advertising's equivalent to fast food - they have become milestones in the history of advertising. Hermann Vaske met the Southerner Freeman at his agency, Cliff Freeman & Partners, in New York at the end of an extremely busy work week.

LA: Have you filled out your time sheet?
Cliff Freeman: Yeah, I have. If I don't, I have no idea what I worked on.

LA: Mr. Freeman, the spots for Little Caesar's have long been gems of American humor. What's the story behind that campaign?

Cliff Freeman: Well, you know, pizza is a fun product. Everyone sits around and eats pizza together, so you've got to have fun for it when you advertise it, you certainly can't treat this seriously. I mean everybody in this category tries humor of a sort, but not always successfully. But humor's a kind of staple in the fast food industry, and of course it is something we do a lot. When we first got the business, we did a lot of very competitive commercials against mainly Pizza Hut. And I think when you're slamming the competition, people find it kind of hard to take unless you do it in a way that is really fun. Then they are able to accept it. Americans really are not totally receptive to dumping the competition unless it's done in a certain way. So we started to do this fun thing due to the competitive nature of these early commercials and, you know, people seemed to like it, so we just kept it up.

LA: Does humor have to do with the unexpected and the surprising?

Cliff Freeman: Absolutely, yeah. I think one of the keys is having something happen that the audience does not expect. When that little bitty woman opened her mouth and out came that gruff "Where's the beef?" that is something that took the audience totally by surprise.

LA: You were on this famous spot for Wendy's?

Cliff Freeman: Yes. On that and the Russian Fashion Show. That whole series directed by Joe Sedelmaier.

LA: So you're the one who wrote that famous line?

Cliff Freeman: Yeah.

LA: It's one of the best lines in the history of advertising.

Cliff Freeman: Big stroke of luck, I'd say.

A lot of things coming together. But you know I had a dinner speech on Friday night and it's interesting, that commercial was shown on a reel with fifteen other commercials we did, and it does not get the laughs the other commercials do. I mean, I look at it now and it does not

customer goes, "What do you mean, I don't have a motor? I just drove here." I mean this is a very American way of dealing with these absurd situations, nobody overreacts, everybody stays very polite while they're doing this stuff. So that is the tenor behind these Little Caesar's



Cliff Freeman

seem all that funny to me, but at the time it was tremendous.

LA: What made you think of this line? Did you go to hamburger places where you got cheated in terms of meat quantity, or what?

Cliff Freeman: Actually the account guys came up with the strategy. At the time Wendy's had a product called the Single, you know, one patty of beef, and it actually was more beef than McDonald's Big Mac or Burger King's Whopper. These just sounded big but in fact they had less beef than this Wendy's thing modestly called a Single. And that was just the strategy and the whole idea of the big bun and that is just something that I dreamed up.

LA: For Little Caesar's you dreamed up the idea of the pizza cooks trying to con consumers into believing that they too offered two pizzas for the price of one.

Cliff Freeman: Yes, it was basically the old idea of the flimflam man, the con man, a very American idea with some rich comedy stuff to draw from.

LA: Have you ever been the victim of a con man?

Cliff Freeman: No, not really, but it is a typically American genre. When you think of the Candid Camera shows. There was this great bit where they took the motor completely out of the car and they coasted it into a service station and asked, "Could you check my oil?" And the mechanic comes back and says, "You don't have a motor in there." And the

spots you're talking about.

LA: Is advertising the fine art of separating people from their money?

Cliff Freeman: I guess it is. It sounds bad but I think it probably is. There are very few things you absolutely need. I guess you need shelter and you need food and you need love ... but you don't need a lot of things that we sell. But they're part of what makes life worth living, I suppose.

LA: Is self-irony an ingredient for good humor in commercials?

Cliff Freeman: I think if you've got what might be thought of as something negative about a product that you can sort of take lightly or make fun of, not taking yourself seriously and being honest about your shortcomings then - again a very American thing - consumers find that very appealing. Self-irony can be very winning. You know, many of the movie stars have this kind of personality, it can be very charming that self-deprecating kind of thing.

LA: What do you think about using celebrities to sell products? Does Hollywood sell?

Cliff Freeman: I think they do if you use them right. You see, celebrities represent something to people. They represent certain character traits. You know, they're friendly, they're grouchy, they're cute, they're, you know, like your next-door neighbor, they're like some stuffy rich guy, etc. So if you use them in a way people perceive them to be, and you use them naturally with the product, it can

work out very well. But quite often, they're not used that well.

LA: What do you think of your competitor Pizza Hut's commercial that starred Anthony Quinn?

Cliff Freeman: Er, you know, I don't like to critique other people's work particularly. I think it's a pretty tough business to be in and, you know, I don't know what the Pizza Hut client is like, so ...

LA: What about Anthony Quinn as an actor?

Cliff Freeman: Well, what about him? He was great as Zorba the Greek. I don't know about pizza sales. Anyway, we also did something with celebrities for Little Caesar's but we did the reverse, we took old, you know, has-been celebrities that would work basically for nothing. We used them to demonstrate that since we charge so little for the pizza we had no money left over for expensive celebrities, so we just went for the cheap guys.

LA: So who did you use?

Cliff Freeman: We had Evil Knievel, the motorcycle guy who was a celebrity in the 70s. And we had this guy who played little Eddie Munster in "The Munsters," you know that was his claim to fame in his whole life, so we had him dressed up like little Eddie - he's in his late thirties now, so that was kind of funny.



Stills from the legendary "Where's the beef?" and ..

LA: With the walls between the disciplines breaking down, with feature film directors making commercials etc, do you find it easier to get celebrities to work in commercials?

Cliff Freeman: I remember when I started I once wrote a jingle and I called up Neil Diamond to see if he would do the lead, this was in the seventies, and he was disgusted and appalled that I would even suggest such a thing. But boy, you know, times have changed and I think people are probably more realistic about life now than they used to be because life is a little bit more precarious, things are not as easy anymore and if you can make a buck doing something, you think, OK, what the hell ...

LA: Last year you did an enormously successful campaign for Prodigy, an on-line service. The director on that was Tony Kaye. How did you find working with him?

Cliff Freeman: It was a great, great experience. I had worked with Tony before once, on some commercials for the Comedy Channel. I met him again in Los Angeles, and we had a nice chat, and David Angelo and I and some other people here came up with this Prodigy campaign, which was a great advertising idea, I think, simplifying a very, very complex service, an on-line service. We showed buses that represent the communities you can find on-line with groups of people on it that had the same interests, you know, like music, pets and fly fishing. And these buses drove around and picked up people who had these same interests. It turned out to be a huge shoot, with potentially a hundred and twenty principals put on three different buses. But Tony has a great sense of the camera and that thing about surprising you with the way he looks at things. He's just a very intuitive thinker and a lot of fun, and this was very much one of these organic processes, you know, where an awful lot came about when we were shooting, a lot of stuff that was not on the boards originally. Also, some outrageous things happened, like we had this pig that collapsed in the heat and just about had cardiac arrest.

LA: Sounds dramatic.

Cliff Freeman: Yeah, they had to whisk this pig off the set and, I'm not making this up, about three or four hours later the pig's lawyer came. It was out in the desert, it was like 115 degrees and out there came this lawyer roaring in his big black Mercedes, did a big doughnut and pulled up. The producers run over there, the car window comes down, the guy in



... "Russian Fashion Show" commercials for Wendy's Hamburgers, written by Cliff Freeman and directed by Joe Sedelmaier.

there says, "I'm representing this pig." He had suspenders on with dollar signs going all up and down and there was this big hush conflag about whether the pig was going to survive this, ... the heat problem and if he didn't, what this was going to mean. It was just so surreal all the while with Tony up in his helicopter shooting this elephant five hours ... But it was great fun, a lot of fun and we were very happy with the result.

LA: What happened to the pig?

Cliff Freeman: He did not die, but we had to use a stand-in pig who wasn't as cute but, you know, that's life, you just go on. We go on to the next problem.

LA: Earlier, we talked about humor as a selling tool. How about shock tactics?

Cliff Freeman: Well, if you mean by shock tactics the things Calvin Klein did in his campaign, being extremely provocative - I don't know if one can call it shocking exactly - yeah, absolutely, I think everything should be provocative in a way. I'm using provocative in the sense of surprising, you know, and that can be a great tool. We did this "Body Shot" campaign for Sauza Tequila where you see a shot of tequila, the lime and the salt, and it was put on people's naked bo-

dies. Did you see that print campaign?

LA: Yeah, it was featured in this magazine a while ago.

Cliff Freeman: That was considered shocking by some. It was all naked bodies after all. So it was shocking, it was sexy but it was also elegant. This campaign did very well.

LA: So what did you think of that "kiddie porn" campaign for Calvin Klein?

Cliff Freeman: Well, my opinion is that it was absolutely dead on. They totally nailed what I believe their objective was. When I saw it, I kind of liked it. I mean, many of the kids weren't very attractive but I thought it was quite successful ultimately even though he had to pull it. I was certainly not offended by it in any way. I didn't take it that way. I knew where he was coming from, it was sort of pornographic but to me he was just trying to mimic something and he did it so well, I thought. I find most of his stuff very effective except perhaps for some of those Obsession commercials.

LA: You're talking about the ones that David Lynch did?

Cliff Freeman: I don't think it was David Lynch who directed the ones I'm thinking of. Perhaps Avedon did them, I don't know.

LA: Would you like to work with David Lynch?

Cliff Freeman: Yeah. Maybe. But, you



Stills from one of the commercials for the Prodigy online service.



An ad from the Sauza Tequila campaign by Cliff Freeman & Partners.

know, I don't think these feature film people do very well at commercials. The Coen Brothers did it and their feature films are great but I don't think their work was very good in commercials. I don't know why.

LA: You mentioned this other campaign you did with Tony Kaye as the director, for the Comedy Channel. These spots feature some of the most extraordinary casting I've ever seen

Cliff Freeman: Well, we just cast here in New York and we used a lot of real people. Or what they call real people. I picked this up from my work with Joe Sedelmaier. He would just pick any good face, any good voice he could find. I guess that's where I learned it, with Sedelmaier. I do it all the time now, I find people who are the part, you know, not who are acting the part. There is a certain naive quality in these people that you can never get from a performance. One of the people in the Comedy Channel campaign was my next-door neighbor who had this outrageous laugh. She's like a Polish washer woman, she never stops laughing. So that's all she had to do - laugh for this entire commercial.

LA: Why are you creative?

Cliff Freeman: Luck. I was lucky ... lucky to be born with certain abilities.

LA: What else do you want to achieve in your life?

Cliff Freeman: Well, I guess I'm mostly focused on the agency now and the growth of the agency and the continually new

challenges coming in, solving new problems. Also, I want to get into slightly different areas with the agency. We're so well known for comedy and certain kinds of things, yet there are so many other things we are capable of doing that we haven't really done. This is really a very collaborative business, we really work here as a team. And it is such a joy, the group coming together, it's like making a movie. When we did this Prodigy thing, it was ten people working together for a month, five or six weeks actually, it was a long time with the editing process and so forth, and you know when you do something that you're really proud of and you have to part, it's kind of hard, it becomes almost like a little family. And this agency's like that, and that's kind of where my focus is now.

LA: You're from the South originally?

Cliff Freeman: Yes, I was born in Mississippi, last stand of the confederacy, Vicksburg, Mississippi. That is where the final battle took place.

LA: Do you own a confederate flag? I once interviewed Alan Parker and he had one in his office.

Cliff Freeman: Oh no, I have no particular feeling about the South, one way or another. I don't particularly feel part of any group, I don't even like the idea of being part of a group, the whole idea, really, except this group, this agency. And my wife and I are a group.

Cliff Freeman spoke to Hermann Vaske in New York.