

Can A Sexy Super Bowl Ad Make A Boring T-Shirt Maker Cool?

Can a t-shirt manufacturer known mostly for wholesale raise its profile with consumers with one racy ad in the Super Bowl? Gildan has bet that the answer is yes. The company, which had almost \$2 billion in sales last year but is largely unknown to consumers, has ponied up about \$4 million to play with the consumer-facing big boys in this year's Super Bowl ad lineup.

2013 Gildan Big Game Ad - 'Getaway'



Your first question after watching the ad is probably, who is Gildan? And for the company, that's basically the point. Gildan sells about 500 million t-shirts a year through wholesale and is the leading brand for blank t-shirts. According to Rob Packard, vice president of marketing for Gildan, the company's products appear in about 80% of U.S. households today. Much of that apparel, however, reaches Americans indirectly after others add value such as a graphic or message, so you don't think of Gildan when you go online to buy a shirt with your favorite sports' teams slogan.

Cue the risky ad heavy on sexual innuendo. "We've talked over the last year and a half or two years about when we would be ready to trumpet the Gildan brand in the consumer arena," Packard says. "With new programs and the distribution we are gaining, now was the time to make a big consumer push."

To do so, Gildan decided to target millennials. Its ad certainly ups the edginess factor for a company that sells directly to consumers through value multi-packs at chains like Wal-Mart.

Gildan posted the spot to YouTube Friday morning [and viewable above]. It tells a straightforward 30-second story of a morning-after “Getaway.” As you can see in the video above, a man wakes up in confusion—lipstick on his cheek, a leopard-print handcuff on his wrist. Looking to slip out of the room without waking a sleeping woman (with whatever implications you care to read into that), the man realizes the woman is wearing his t-shirt. Attempting to covertly retrieve the shirt, the man is stopped in his tracks by a judging look from her cat. We are told “it’s about time you had a favorite t-shirt.”

Such content will likely generate some buzz, but the question will be whether that skews positive or negative. First-time advertisers have the chance to make a big splash, says Derek Rucker, a professor of marketing at Northwestern’s [Kellogg School of Management](#). But there’s also the potential for a national public relations nightmare, such as with [Groupon](#)’s disastrous “[Save the Money](#)” ad from 2011.

With such high stakes, advertisers often find it easier to follow the leader and stick to safe content—that’s why you see so many babies, cute animals, and slapstick jokes. Creative experts have told FORBES in the past that they like to see their peers take more risks and break from that comfort zone.

Gildan appears to be trying to do just that, and the industry at least has noticed. “Gildan potentially has the most risk of getting into trouble,” says Tim Calkins, a colleague of Rucker’s at Kellogg. “They are trying very hard to build their brand appeal to young people and push the envelope, and it will be interesting to see if they can attract a lot of public attention.”

The ad was made by agency DeVito/Verdi, which Gildan was working with on creative for the brand’s sponsored college football bowl game. Packard and his team were pleased enough with the ongoing work that they committed to the Super Bowl in October.

Gildan’s big move comes with risk, but Packard stresses that his company’s already got strong growth and massive scale (it’s one of the top several cotton purchasers in the U.S.) behind the marketing move. “I’m just trying to get us on the outside,” he says. “You’re probably already wearing us, but we are a well-kept secret.”

Viewers, and the ad industry, will watch closely to see if Gildan joins the ranks of successful advertisers or stumbles in its first (and then potentially only) ad attempt. The company’s main goal, for viewers to know the brand name when they shop for clothes, could end up coming at a heavy cost. But in a marketing lineup already heavy with perennials such as Chrysler and [Budweiser](#), Gildan is at least shaking things up. A bit of fresh blood is good for the industry and the fans.