

“To Live and Die in Miami”... A Death-Defying Decision By an Insensitive Brand



Image source: Twitter

Steve Cody, Founder / CEO, Peppercomm

There's insensitive and then there's the decision by the Kraft Heinz brand Planters to air a highly controversial commercial depicting the funeral of their 104-year-old icon, Mr. Peanut, during this Sunday's Super Bowl.

The campaign, which debuted earlier this week with a creepy Tweet suggesting that Mr. Peanut had committed suicide was quickly followed by a video depicting an SUV rollover accident in which Mr. Peanut (along with actors Wesley Snipes and Matt Walsh) are flung from the car and land on a dead tree branch overhanging a deep canyon. To save the actors, Mr. Peanut decides to let go of his grip and falls to his death hundreds of feet below.

But wait, there's more. Planters has a follow-up spot set to run during the pre-game events and third quarter of Super Bowl LIV in Miami. It will "broadcast" the funeral of Mr. Peanut.

Since I don't claim to be an expert in branding or the role of comedy in advertising, I turned to two experts to ask their opinions.

Clayton Fletcher, a professional comedian who doubles as Peppercomm's chief comedy officer (I kid you not), had these thoughts:

"We live in a world of 24x7 tragedy. Americans need respite from the nonstop negative news cycle. The Super Bowl provides just such a relief. It's akin to what Major League Baseball was for Americans on the home front during WW II – a temporary escape from reality," he said.

As far as airing the funeral ceremonies during the big game, Fletcher said he agreed with the decision. "People have short memories and the mourning period for Kobe will have ended, at least for the general public. Planters spent a ton of money and other resources in producing this ad, and it's time to put it out there and just hope people laugh. Think of it as Hollywood on a smaller scale: The latter makes a lot of movies. Some work and some for many reasons turn out awful, but they still air. There's just too much invested to do otherwise," he added.

Hayes Roth, former Landor Associates CMO and principal of HA Roth Consulting, disagreed.

"First, I have been rather mystified by the whole 'Death of Mr. Peanut' campaign from its inception. To me it's an obvious tease– Planters has invested millions in reviving the character over the past couple of years, so I doubt they really intend to drop him (excuse the pun) after that.

"More likely, since the spokesnut is currently on every

package and piece of marketing, this is an attention-getting ploy to build an ongoing 'Save Mr. Peanut' narrative that will be introduced with the Super Bowl spots. Whatever the outcome, using death as a comic messaging hook under any circumstance is in bad taste and, I believe, a fast trip to branding hell. To push forward with such a theme on the Super Bowl a week after Bryant's tragic death is potentially a one-way ticket to the Marketing Hall of Shame."

I concur with Roth. Why would any brand willfully alienate a percentage of the public? It's already a Darwinian survival of the fittest marketplace, so why cause a self-inflicted wound with the backlash that's bound to follow?

I do hope someone with an ethical and sensitivity compass (as well as a pulse on the open wound that is the Kobe Bryant death) will step in and issue a surgeon general-type report to the Planters marketing team: "Warning. Airing this commercial will cause irreparable harm to your brand. Side effects could include boycotts, a huge drop in sales and death."

The Mr. Peanut's brand will live or die in Miami.



About the Author: *I'm a comedian, climber and dog lover, but not necessarily in that order. I am also the founder and CEO of Peppercomm, a fully-integrated strategic communications firm headquartered in NYC, with offices located in San Francisco and London. In that role*

I'm responsible for everything from implementing strategy and counseling clients to leading business development and bringing new products and services to market. In short, I do everything but clean windows. My biggest passion is helping others. I derive immense satisfaction from mentoring students,

guest lecturing at the universities who are brave enough to invite me to speak, and helping fellow mid-life marketing communications professionals who have lost their way in life. There may be hope for us yet.

I am the current chairman of the Institute for Public Relations, a longtime member of the Arthur W. Page Society, a member of the advisory councils of the College of Charleston and the University of Florida, and was named one of Northeastern University's 100 most successful alumni. I have also co-authored "What's keeping your customers up at night?" which was published by McGraw-Hill in 2003 and has put thousands of readers to sleep over the years.

I'm proud to say that I've used my love of stand-up comedy to raise more than \$100,000 for countless charities. I'm just as proud to see Chris and Catharine, my two children, grow up to become successful professionals. I'm confident the family tradition will continue with my grandson, Adrian Joseph "A.J." Cody. May he outperform us all.

A sense of humor means:

A person has the resiliency to deal with the realities of the modern world while maintaining his energy, drive, enthusiasm and smile. Life's far too short. Loosen up