
Big Blue Longevity Dots

By Kerry Pechter Thu, Jan 31, 2013

For Prudential Financial's 30-second Super Bowl ad, its agency built a scoreboard-sized wall in a park in Austin, Texas and recruited hundreds of random Texans to post pie-sized blue stickers on it.

"We went out and asked people a simple question," says Harvard professor Daniel Gilbert in a commercial for Prudential Financial that will run during this Sunday's Super Bowl broadcast. "How old is the oldest person you've known?"

Shot in Austin, Texas, shortly after Superstorm Sandy hammered the Northeast, the 30-second spot serves as the opening kickoff of Prudential's spring 2013 "Stickers" ad campaign, which follows Prudential's award-winning 2012 campaign, "Day One."

The Newark-based insurer thus joins at least 33 other major firms who are paying up to a reported \$4 million per 30-second spot to advertise in America's annual football extravaganza. Prudential's ad will appear several times, but primarily during the pre-game show and with all but one spot reaching only the New York and Austin markets.

The Stickers campaign was created for Prudential by Droga5, the same firm responsible for "Day One." Both campaigns find a simple but sophisticated way to breathe life into the potentially dry (and even morbid) retirement income story by enlisting the participation of distinctly ordinary people in real-life, real-time events.

The two campaigns tell the story in different ways, however. Designed to dramatize the fact that 10,000 Baby Boomers are retiring every day, the Day One ads are slow-moving video vignettes that capture the musings of individuals on their first day of retirement.

The Stickers commercial, which dramatizes the fact that more and more people are living longer, is livelier. On November 3, the filmmakers built a giant white wall in the middle of a park in Austin and recruited hundreds of more or less random passersby to take turns climbing a 20-foot rolling ladder and attaching pie-sized blue stickers to the wall.

When the camera zooms out to reveal what they've created, viewers see that the hundreds of blue stickers have formed a giant Gaussian distribution in which each sticker corresponds to the age of the oldest person that each participant has known.

You've heard of populating a chart with data. In this commercial, people literally populate a chart with their own hands.

"When we landed on this idea, it was Eureka," said Colin McConnell, Prudential's in-house ad director. "We're focusing on the idea that we all know people who are living longer. Living longer has usually been positioned as a dark sinister thing. We wanted to say that living longer is a good thing."

“Financial services advertising is very challenging,” he added. “We’re always looking for a type of messaging that can balance the need for emotional and cognitive connection in a way that seems right for our category.” The TV ad is tied to a participatory Web and social media campaign in which people can “dedicate” blue stickers to older people they’ve known.

Prudential is not the biggest financial services advertiser, but it’s among the leaders. Citing SNL Financial figures, *LifeHealthPro* reported last August that among life insurers, MetLife was the top spender on advertising in 2011, at \$540.5 million. Next in order were New York Life (\$139.5 million), Mutual of Omaha (\$117.5 million) and Prudential (\$91.3 million).

According to the *2012 AdAge Financial Services Report*, published last October and based on Kantar Media data, Prudential was ninth in spending when benchmarked against investment and retirement-product firms, with \$35.2 million in 2011, up 64% from \$21.4 million in 2010. Fidelity (FMR Corp.) topped that list with 2011 media spending of \$148.5 million.

The “host” of the Prudential Stickers commercial, Harvard social psychology professor Daniel Gilbert, 55, is a celebrity in his own right. Millions know him as the bestselling author of *Stumbling on Happiness* (Random House, 2007) and as the co-author and host of “This Emotional Life,” a six-part series aired on public television in 2010.

Prudential’s agency, Droga5, was started by former Saatchi & Saatchi chief creative officer David Droga and others in 2006. It has become one of world’s most admired agencies, with a client list that, besides Prudential, includes American Express, Coca-Cola, Kraft Foods, Puma and Unilever. It was Adweek’s 2012 Agency of the Year.

In a 30-second spot, simplicity is a big asset, and close viewings of the Stickers commercial show how simple its structure is. Using what looks like the kind of basic A-and-B roll technique that first-year film students learn, shots of people receiving their blue dots and attaching them to the white wall are sandwiched between opening and closing shots of Gilbert, whose affable voice-over narration ties the whole piece together.

The color blue—Prudential’s trademark blue—is used as a brand-reinforcing theme throughout the commercial. Gilbert wears a blue shirt, for instance, as do three of the four people—a young girl, a woman, and two men—who are prominently featured.

At about the midpoint of the commercial, in what might be a subliminal nod to the male-dominated Super Bowl audience, we see a curvy young blond woman in a close-fitting blue dress stooping to affix her sticker to a low spot on the wall. We never see her face, and the image lasts only a second. But at these ad rates, every second counts.