

Hello again, I'm Vista

Aug 7th 2008 | SAN FRANCISCO

From *The Economist* print edition

Microsoft hires a hot ad agency in an effort to improve its image

WERE advertisements rather than sales the yardstick, Apple would have dominated the computer industry for decades. First there was the legendary spot “1984”, in that same year, which is often considered the best ad in history. Directed by Ridley Scott, then basking in “Blade Runner” fame, and produced by Chiat/Day, Apple’s advertising agency to this day, it depicted Apple as the individualist and cool brand, in contrast to oppressive conformity, then understood to mean IBM.

Ever since then, the same man, Lee Clow, at what is now TBWA\Chiat\Day, part of Omnicom, a giant marketing group, has been socking it to Apple’s bigger rival, Microsoft. His deadliest work yet is the current “Get a Mac” campaign—better known by its opening lines: “Hello, I’m a Mac—and I’m a PC.” In the American version of the ad, a suave Mac, played by Justin Long, an actor, contrasts with a lovable but decidedly uncool PC, played by John Hodgman, a comedian who has been catapulted to celebrity as a result. The upshot, as ever: Apple’s Mac types are elegantly effective; Microsoft’s PC folks are bumbling plodders.

All this puts Microsoft in the awkward position of having its brand image defined by a rival—despite its own vast advertising budget, which towers above Apple’s. But Microsoft has also made Apple’s task a lot easier. It has made software that, by comparison with Apple’s, is buggy and clunky. Most notoriously, Microsoft’s latest operating system, Windows Vista, was first delayed for years, then launched to dreadful reviews and is now selling more slowly than expected, even after big price cuts.

So Microsoft is fighting back. A preliminary salvo, fired last month, was the so-called “Mojave Experiment”—a focus group in San Francisco of 140 volunteers who had not actually tried Vista but professed that they had heard awful things about it. They were then treated to ten-minute demos by a trained expert of a “new” operating system, allegedly called Mojave. They liked what they saw, and when told that this product was in fact Vista, they gasped in shock and delight. The climactic moments, naturally, are available for viewing at www.mojaveexperiment.com.

You could be forgiven for wondering whether Apple had commissioned the advertisement. It was Microsoft at its worst. The “experiment” addressed none of the problems with Vista—the trouble starts when ordinary consumers, not experts, try to use it with their existing hardware—and it felt as authentic as “reality” television.

But Microsoft is also preparing a much bigger attack. Earlier this year the firm caused a stir when it passed over its previous advertising agencies and chose Crispin Porter + Bogusky, arguably the hottest agency today, to put together a campaign rumoured to be costing \$300m. Crispin’s brief is to come up with an answer to Apple’s campaign that does not feel reactive, and somehow makes Microsoft look cool.

By reputation, Crispin, based in Miami and Boulder, Colorado, might be the one agency that could pull off such a miracle. Its creative star is Alex Bogusky, though he has now risen to management level. In recent years, Crispin has revived, among other brands, Burger King, while coming up with admired campaigns for the Mini and Volkswagen. That said, there have also been flops, such as the baffling “Algorithm” campaign for Ask.com, which seemed to promote its larger rival Google.

Making Microsoft sexy is certain to be Crispin’s biggest challenge yet, as its creative types are

surely aware—since they, in line with the rest of their industry, overwhelmingly own and use Macs. But it may be possible. Apple’s campaign has left itself vulnerable in at least one unforeseen way. Although everyone watching its spots agrees that Macs are cooler, most people also adore Mr Hodgman’s PC. By contrast, Mr Long’s Mac comes across as mildly but increasingly smug and irritating.

(668 words, summary 223 words)