

Big Game Ads Stir Controversy

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Groupon Super Bowl commercials raise ire

NEW YORK (AP), February 07, 2011, Mae Anderson --- Online coupon site Groupon Inc.'s first foray into Super Bowl advertising aimed for humor but instead struck a raw nerve with viewers and human-rights groups for mocking serious social issues.

In one commercial, Timothy Hutton says "the people in Tibet are in trouble, their culture is in jeopardy," as pictures of Tibet are shown on the screen. The punchline? It turns out he's talking about a fish curry deal group.com offered.

The ad, which debuted during the biggest night in advertising, when spots go for \$3 million for 30 seconds, sparked widespread negative reaction on Twitter and Facebook.

According to research firm Alterian's "Buzz Bowl," which measures online activity, Groupon was among the five most-discussed advertisers online. But the buzz was bad, with 13 percent of conversations classified as "negative" and just 6 percent "positive."

The Groupon ads weren't the only ones that some felt went too far.

Homeaway.com, a vacation rental Web site, ran an ad that showed people trying to fit into a crowded hotel room in a testing lab, resulting in a "test-baby" being flung against a glass window.

While slapstick humor is always common among Super Bowl ads — Pepsi Max had two ads showing people getting clocked in various body parts with soda cans — the "test baby" gag crossed a line suggesting child abuse for some viewers.

In Groupon's pre-game ad, Cuba Gooding Jr. decried the plight of whales, but then touted a group.com deal for a whale watching cruise. In a post-game commercial, Elizabeth Hurley lamented deforestation but then discussed a deal on a Brazilian wax.

The ads were created by Crispin Porter + Bogusky in Miami, an agency known for quirky work for Burger King and Ikea, and directed by Christopher Guest ("A Mighty Wind").

All ads point viewers to www.savethemoney.org, which does actually encourage visitors to donate to each of the charities related to the causes in the ads: including Rainforest Action Network, Tibet Fund, Greenpeace and buildOn.

But that message was lost, said Laura Ries, president of Ries & Ries, an Atlanta-based marketing strategy firm.

"Most people will learn about it after they saw the ads and think it's a reaction to negative PR," she said. But she added a bigger problem with the campaign is that it didn't really make clear what group.com, which offers hundreds of daily discounts in 500 local markets, is all about.

"They went for the joke and they forgot the strategy, and that is probably a common rookie mistake in the Super Bowl," she said.

Groupon had no immediate response. On Twitter it directed people to savethemoney.org to "support Tibet's largest charity."

But some human rights organizations spoke out against the ad because it makes light of the situation in Tibet, which has been controlled by China for 60 years. The Chinese government's handling of Tibet is frequently protested by human rights groups for political repression.

"It could be argued that the advert has helped raise the profile of what is happening in Tibet, after all awareness is the first step to accountability," U.K.-based nonprofit Free Tibet said on its Web site. "But it does put Tibetans and their suffering at the heart of the joke and when it's used for commercial purposes, that is exploitative."

The negative reaction is a black eye for the two-year-old startup, based in Chicago, which has grown quickly, spawned numerous imitators and enjoyed investor enthusiasm. It rejected a \$6 billion takeover bid from Google Inc. last year.

The flap probably won't cause permanent damage.

"They had a bad game," she said. "Is it a losing season? Probably not."