

An Elegy for Rob Lowe's DirecTV Commercials

After assaults from "shy bladder" groups, cable companies, and the Better Business Bureau, the extremely effective ad campaign is finally being pulled.



ADAM CHANDLER

APRIL 9, 2015

With roughly a quarter of Millennials backing away from pay television, cable companies and satellite-television providers are locked in a heated battle for a pool of subscribers that is diminishing for the first time ever.

Last fall, DirecTV fired a massive salvo by enlisting the preternaturally handsome Rob Lowe for an aggressive ad campaign to convince habitués of CableLand to switch to satellite. The ads, in case you somehow managed to miss them, featured regular, suave, urbane Rob Lowe (representing satellite television) and bizarre, lesser versions of Rob Lowe (representing cable television).

The formula was pretty simple: Each lesser Rob Lowe—"far less attractive," "scrawny arms," "painfully awkward," "crazy hairy," "creepy"—highlighted one of cable's inadequacies before the spot faded out to the theme to *St. Elmo's Fire*, a nod to Lowe's maudlin mid-1980s star turn.

Here is a link to one of the many commercials Rob Lowe starred in for Direct TV:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGeJV7_0Wsg

If you think the "othering" of cable television subscribers went without controversy, you'd be wrong. The above spot provoked the ire of the International Paruresis Association (IPA), which advocates for the 21 million Americans who, as Lowe's alter ego put it, "can't go with other people in the room." (For more on that particular social anxiety disorder, check out my colleague Julie Beck's fantastic piece on it.)

"In this particular case," said IPA chief Steve Soifer, "the portrayal is making it look ridiculous, that this guy is a loser for having a problem."

Over the weekend, the Rob Lowe campaign was finally put out to pasture, replaced by a similar campaign featuring supermodel Hannah Davis. But before we move on, let us pause to note the effectiveness of the spots.

First, there is the cultural imprint of the campaign, perhaps an upshot of the commercials' ubiquity. They were funny, they were quirky, and they featured an actor with cross-generational credibility. Following the wild end to this year's Super Bowl, one football-related riff on the ad became a meme.

Here's another extremely involved college-basketball fan's version:

Rob Lowe retweeted
Thaddeus Kazunas @TeddyKazunas · Apr 4
This has to be the best sign I've seen @RobLowe #BBN



(For the record, Wisconsin won that game.) Also, consider losing five minutes of your life to this Reddit debate over whether women would be more attracted to "Peaked in High School" Rob Lowe or "Meathead" Rob Lowe.

But the biggest achievement of all may be that the campaign was successful enough to warrant a response from competitors. Comcast, the cable provider, actually filed a complaint to the National Advertising Division (NAD), the self regulators of the advertising industry, contending that DirecTV wasn't being truthful about the reliability, picture quality, and customer satisfaction of its service when placed beside cable. With utter seriousness, the NAD announced that it agreed with Comcast on Tuesday:

NAD determined that a reasonable takeaway from the "Creepy Rob Lowe" commercial was that DirecTV has better signal reliability than cable, that the "Painfully Awkward Rob Lowe Commercial" conveyed the message that DirecTV has shorter customer service wait times than cable and that the "Far Less Attractive Rob Lowe" commercial made an implied claim that DirecTV has better picture and sound quality than cable. Given the absence in the record of supporting evidence, NAD recommended the advertiser discontinue the claims.

On Wednesday, Rob Lowe took to Twitter to push back: "Recent events have underlined my belief that for something to be truly original, funny and subversive there must also be fallout. #Life"

Since NAD cases can be referred to the Federal Trade Commission, DirecTV's decision to discontinue the Rob Lowe campaign may forestall some future headaches for the company. Nevertheless, DirecTV offered a classic retort to Comcast's complaint, arguing that "the various Rob Lowe advertisements are so outlandish and exaggerated that no reasonable consumer would believe that the statements being made by the alter ego characters are comparative or need to be. The efforts to discredit the ads, however, only underscore their efficacy. "In the third quarter of 2014, DirecTV lost 28,000 subscribers," writes Stephen Battaglio in the *Los Angeles Times*. "In the following quarter, when the campaign started its run, the company gained 149,000 subscribers. The figure was a steep increase from the 93,000 who signed up in the fourth quarter of 2013." Presumably, not all of those were Rob Lowe alter egos.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/04/anelegyforroblovedirectvcommercials/390036/>