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Diving Into Reeking Squalor to Test an Air Freshener

By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

FOR all the freshening claims made by room deodorizer brands in commercials, the approach of the advertisements themselves can be pretty musty, following a predictable script.

Typically, an actress realizes that her immaculate suburban home has been fouled by the smell of cooked fish, her husband's cigars or her teenage son's gym bag. After she sprays air freshener, however, odors disappear, as evidenced by her ecstatic inhalations and, occasionally, by her being instantly transported to a flower garden or orange grove.

Febreze, the [Procter & Gamble](#) brand, is turning its nose up at that approach.

For a series of television commercials and online videos, the brand recruited subjects off the street, who agreed to be blindfolded for what they were told was a scent experiment. Then, in video captured by hidden cameras, the participants were guided into odoriferous settings, like a dilapidated motel room strewn with dirty clothes, a secondhand store filled with threadbare furniture and soiled stuffed animals, and a cramped Chinese restaurant kitchen with whole uncooked fish on counters.

In the commercials, each setting is shown being treated with a Febreze product, like fabric spray or room spray, before the blindfolded subjects are led in.

In one spot, two women approached on the street in the SoHo section of Manhattan are led blindfolded into an abandoned section of a building, where they are seated on an old, torn couch that has clumps of dog hair.

As two dogs dart around the room, they are asked by an off-screen interviewer to take deep breaths and report what they smell.

One of the women says, "Light floral, lilac," and "Like when you have fresh laundry." The other

adds, “Maybe even a little bit of citrus,” “a little bit beachy” and “wispy white curtains.”

They are told to **remove their blindfolds**, and the squalor of the room registers on their shocked faces, with both saying, “Oh, my god,” before two members of the film crew approach them wielding Febreze.

“Join us on Facebook for more experiments as Febreze sets out to make everyone breathe happy — no matter what,” says a voiceover, as the slogan for the campaign, “Breathe Happy,” appears on the screen.

The spots, by Grey New York, part of the Grey Group unit of WPP, are scheduled to be posted on YouTube and Facebook on Friday and to be shown on television beginning July 7.

“What we have done is put our products to the ultimate torture test,” said Jeff Pierce, a spokesman for Febreze. “If Febreze is so strong that it works in this dirty hotel room or on this gross couch, then it’s definitely going to work on my seemingly clean couch, blanket or any fabric in the home.”

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Tor Myhren, president and chief creative officer at Grey New York, said the impetus for the campaign came from a consumer focus group.

“Someone said, ‘You can close your eyes, but you can’t turn off your nose,’ and that’s a brilliant insight,” Mr. Myhren said. “We said that’s a big, big, big idea that we need to bring to life.”

Members of Procter & Gamble’s research and development team were on the sets for the commercials, which were shot in New York and Los Angeles.

“The R.& D. team would be there with their clipboards and they’d walk in and would say that they thought the malodor was there,” said Elena Grasmann, a vice president at Grey who attended the shoots. (Ms. Grasmann’s own assessment: “It smelled.”)

After Febreze representatives sprayed the sets with the product, they, along with the director and representatives from Grey, huddled in a nearby trailer and watched the proceedings unfold on monitors.

“We all sat there watching and we were anxious and then we were amazed,” said Ms. Grasmann. For the scientists, it was particularly “rewarding for them given that they worked on these products,” she said.

On Facebook, Febreze, which has more than 262,000 followers, will show additional video, including interviews with the subjects, and will solicit suggestions for odorous settings for future commercials.

The brand is also setting up booths at events for blindfold tests, including one planned, appropriately enough, for the Gilroy Garlic Festival in Gilroy, Calif., July 29 to 31. (Among the festival sponsors is another Procter & Gamble brand: Scope.)

Introduced in 1999 as a fabric spray for items that could not be laundered, Febreze expanded into air fresheners in 2004. It has a 68 percent share of the fabric freshener market and a 12.5 percent share of the air freshener market in the United States, according to Euromonitor International, a market research firm.

The brand spent \$132.3 million on advertising in 2010 and \$25.6 million in the first quarter of 2011, according to the Kantar Media unit of WPP.

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With consumers increasingly sharing unvarnished opinions of products in online reviews, and the popularity of reality television, it is fitting that marketers are using nonactors in commercials.

A successful 2007 Burger King campaign, “[Whopper Freakout](#),” featured real customers who ordered a Whopper at the counter or drive-through window and were told — erroneously, of course — that the sandwich had been discontinued. Hidden cameras captured their reactions, which ranged from stunned sadness to rage. The campaign was by Crispin Porter & Bogusky, part of MDC Partners.

Commercials for air fresheners tend to have “an almost Victorian aversion to the unpleasant,” said David Vinjamuri, author of “Accidental Branding” and an adjunct professor of marketing at New York University.

Asked to review the new Febreze commercials, he said he was impressed.

“You have a visceral reaction to these commercials even before you see the reaction of the subjects, because you don’t see those kinds of environments in advertising in general,” Mr. Vinjamuri said.

“It’s a classic advertising setup in terms of showing a problem and solution, but in a much more credible format,” he continued.



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