

# Why Advertising's Cavemen Are Going Totally Hollyrock

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Is finding a way for marketers to beat commercial-zapping DVRs and helping networks to cure the distressed state of TV comedy so simple that a caveman could do it?

ABC's decision last week to greenlight a half-hour pilot program based on Geico's popular cavemen characters highlights the blurring line between advertising and entertainment, as well as the trouble the network has had in launching successful sitcoms.



Geico ads, like one with a caveman at the therapist, popularized the character.

of marketing. "We are excited to have an opportunity to do brand extension."

Although the project is at a nascent stage -- there's no script and no cast -- plans call for the comedy to be titled "Cavemen" and focus on a trio of prehistoric characters who battle prejudice in modern-day Atlanta. [Walt Disney Co.](#)'s ABC will pay for the pilot and show, if one eventually materializes. Geico, a unit of [Berkshire Hathaway Inc.](#), will have no creative control but will receive a royalty payment for the use of the character.

"We sell car insurance; we don't make TV shows," says Ted Ward, Geico's vice president

While marketers have long depended heavily on so-called product placement where products are written into the story line of a show, some are now going even further by creating entertainment programming that subtly reminds viewers of a brand name.

"It's about delivering to them something they want to see and not interrupting them," says Doug Scott, executive director of branded content and entertainment at [WPP Group](#)'s Ogilvy & Mather North America. In many ways, the trend harkens back to early TV, when shows like "Colgate Comedy Hour" were produced or sponsored by advertisers.

One of the most aggressive has been [Burger King Holdings Inc.](#) The chain has focused over the last year on lifting the profile of its "King" mascot, a mute character best known for his creepy smile. The burger baron recently starred in a series of videogames, and the company says it has lined up a studio and distributor for a feature film. Russ Klein, Burger King's president of global marketing strategy, won't reveal the studio's identity or the likely plot. But he says the movie could appear as early as the end of this year, with the film aimed at "creating a back story for the King."



Burger King

The Burger King has a movie deal.

Geico introduced the cavemen characters three years ago, initially in an ad promoting Geico's Web site that used the slogan "It's so easy to use Geico.com, even a caveman could do it." The ad became popular and a series of sequels followed, mostly centered on the idea of cavemen being offended by the insensitive slogan of the first commercial.

The characters have achieved celebrity status, thanks, in part, to Geico's enormous ad budget. The insurer spent an estimated \$403 million on ad time and space in 2005, according to TNS Media Intelligence, an amount expected to be up 20% last year although final data aren't available. Geico receives hundreds of letters and emails about the characters, and fans at college sporting events have been known to hold up signs that say "Beating [team name] is so easy, even a caveman can do it."

More recently, the caveman has been showing up outside ads. Eight days ago an actor dressed as a caveman showed up at the Academy Awards and attended an after-Oscars bash. Last month, the caveman played a round of golf with football analyst Phil Simms during his Super Bowl pregame show on [CBS Corp.](#)'s CBS. The five segments totaled about three minutes. The deal was part of an ad package that Horizon Media, Geico's media buying firm, cooked up with CBS that also included running cavemen ads during the network's hours-long run-up to the National Football League championship.

These appearances were part of a strategy by Geico and the ad agency that crafted the cavemen spots, [Interpublic Group](#)'s Martin Agency, to move the character beyond commercials. Like many other marketers, the insurer recognizes that the deluge of ads on television -- and digital video recorders that allow viewers to skip commercials -- means traditional ads aren't as effective as in the past.

"As a marketer you have to look for new and unusual ways to get your brand out there because of large amount of messaging clutter and media fragmentation," says Geico's Mr. Ward.

The initiative for the cavemen pilot came from Joe Lawson, the writer behind the cavemen commercials and a Martin Agency employee, who decided in late fall to pursue

a TV show. With Geico's approval, the ad firm hired entertainment services agency [Management 360](#) to shop the idea to networks.

Although reaction was mixed -- NBC, for instance, says it passed -- the concept allowed ABC a chance to address a set of persistent challenges. While achieving enormous success with the dramas "Grey's Anatomy" and "Desperate Housewives," the network has for years failed to launch a successful sitcom. In "Cavemen," executives saw a funny idea with a built-in marketing hook.

A spokeswoman for the ABC Television Studio, which will produce the pilot, said no executive would speak about the project because "it's way too premature to comment." She cautioned that there is no guarantee "Cavemen" will result in a prime-time show. ABC has ordered 15 other comedy pilots for the 2007-2008 television season and will likely give the green light to fewer than five for full-fledged series production.

Much remains uncertain. It isn't clear whether ABC would use the three little-known actors who have starred in the ads. The three are identified by a person close to the agency as Jeff Daniel Phillips, Ben Weber and John Lehr. It's also not clear whether Geico would continue to use the cavemen ads if the series was to get off the ground, although ABC would see that as a positive, according to a person familiar with the network's thinking, as the ads would help promote the show.

The road to Hollywood isn't without potholes for advertisers. CBS in 2002 tried building a sitcom around a talking baby popularized in a commercial for an Internet company. "Baby Bob" lasted only five months. Still, some ad characters have had some success. The California Raisins, which appeared in ads for the California Raisin Board, were a pop-culture hit in the 1980s. The clay-animated figures, best known for an ad where they sing and dance to "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," starred in a TV special and had a short-lived cartoon series on CBS.

If the cavemen series does make it to air, it will leave in the dust Geico's famed Green Gecko, which is in many ways more popular than the cavemen but has no spinoff in the works. Says Geico's Mr. Ward: "Evidently the Gecko doesn't have the right agent."

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