

Duelling Couches

Bell responds to Rogers' home-phone challenge, but observers are skeptical that anyone wins through negative advertising

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Blue has aimed its sights at red, in the realm of politics and in marketing, since long before Pepsi took a swipe at Coca-Cola in the 1970s with the Pepsi Challenge.

But in the annals of corporate mudslinging, it's not clear who will emerge victorious in the latest Bell-versus-Rogers advertising battle -- although it's likely Bell will have spent a lot less money on its efforts.

Last month, Rogers Communications Inc. debuted an ad campaign for its home phone service encouraging consumers to take the "Rogers home phone challenge," illustrating the Rogers-versus-Bell argument with the aid of a bicolor couch, one half red (signifying Rogers), the other half in Bell Canada's signature sea-blue hue. Television ads showed people testing out a cordless phone on both sides of the couch and declaring the quality of the reception the same. Outdoor billboard art showed the divided couch with the tag line, "The only difference? The price."

While the telecommunications rivals have been loath to ever name each other directly, from the sounds of it, the sight of Bell blue in Rogers ads proclaiming equality and price victory in their once-hallowed home land-line segment made Bell executives see red.

Within a week, Bell fired back with an ad featuring a couch that looks all but identical, disputing the price point with the tag line "Get more than Rogers for less than Rogers," and visually emphasizing the image by dramatically extending Bell's blue section of the couch. "We don't normally name our competitors as part of our approach, [but]when they started the debate, we decided to embrace the tactic and have a bit of fun with them and sort of do a jujitsu move on them," said Rick Seifeddine, senior vice-president of brand at Bell Canada. "They put the couch down and we sat right on it," he chuckled. "When our executives are in that mood, decisions happen in a calibrated way, very quickly."

While marketing nabobs can debate the merits of negative advertising practices, the dueling couch campaigns have led to the bewilderment of some consumers, many of whom do not

know which campaign came first; others, thinking the ads came from a single company, were befuddled about when the corporate messaging seemed to change around the same image.

"The problem I see with this kind of advertising is it simply confuses the consumer to the point no one wins," wrote Cameron, an online commentator at the forum digitalhome.ca." The point gets lost in the similarities."

While stymieing its rival's negative ad campaign might have been precisely Bell's point, in the end the exercise is not likely to win Bell many favours with consumers, said marketing consultant Lyle Goodis of Toronto-based Lyle Goodis and Associates.

"I don't think you can ever convince someone through negative advertising," he said. "There are so many other creative opportunities to explain to someone why you are better than a competitor. One competitor could blow the other out of the water by offering customer service that was clearly superior to the other and market that. Customer satisfaction will help the business in the shorter term and the longer term in terms of earnings and market

Mr. Seifeddine countered that the campaign was not supposed to look or sound original.

"It is a reaction," he said. "This was about function more than form. We have had our moments of form, but this was a moment of smacking that tennis ball back at them."

The red couch/blue couch concept, conceived by Rogers' agency of record Publicis of Toronto, was intended to open customers up to the idea of comparison shopping, said Phil Hartling, vice-president of consumer services at Rogers cable.

"Our intention in the advertising is to make it clear that customers have a choice," he said. The TV ads also emphasize that there is no qualitative difference between Rogers' home phone service, which launched in 2005, and Bell's home phone service.

When asked about Bell's swift retort, Mr. Hartling said, "I will never comment on somebody else's advertising ... but I will say that you don't have to imitate if you have the best product."

He also suggested the couch is not a particularly important part of Rogers' overall branding arsenal.

"Campaigns come and go," he said. "[The couch] is certainly generating conversation but you have to recognize that there are a whole variety of ways that we talk to customers." Typically Rogers runs campaigns for five to six weeks, he said, and then moves on to something new.

"We are working on the next phase now," he said, without confirming whether a couch of any colour would be present in the new executions.

Bell's rebuke is typical of the new, more proactive marketing era at Bell, said David Moore, president of the advertising agency

Leo Burnett in Toronto, one of four agencies used by Bell in a new collaborative agency model.

"I think it's reflective of a more competitive and nimble culture at Bell that is willing to react quickly to market conditions when they might not have in the past," he said. Wade Oosterman, chief brand officer, who worked with Mr. Seifeddine and George Cope, Bell chief executive, until the three departed for Bell in 2005, has been credited with a bolder approach, pulling the animated Bell beaver campaign and focusing his efforts on streamlining the marketing focus to the conglomerate's core businesses.