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ADVERTISING

Not Daffy or Donald, but Still Aflac's Rising Star

By [STUART ELLIOTT](#)

DURING the Depression, a comedian named Joe Penner slayed audiences with a routine he called "Wanna buy a duck?" Decades later, as tough times return, a marketer is playing up a duck whose pitch is "Wanna buy some insurance?"

The duck is the spokescreature for Aflac, formally the American Family Life Assurance Company of Columbus. A decade after the duck's advertising debut, the character is taking on a more prominent role in a campaign scheduled to start on Wednesday.

The duck will become a teacher of sorts, urging consumers and businesses to "Get the Aflacts" about how Aflac insurance works. The campaign, created by the Kaplan Thaler Group in New York, part of the Publicis Groupe, includes television and radio commercials, print and online ads, promotions, posters, brochures and presences on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

The duck is also lending a body part to a new theme for Aflac, which will be brought out with the new campaign. Rather than ending with the prosaic phrase "Ask about it at work," the ads will now conclude with this emotional promise: "We've got you under our wing."

(Somewhere, [Cole Porter](#) is ducking.)

The campaign is emblematic of efforts by many marketers to keep large-scale ad plans on track despite the recession. In some instances, the economy is actually emboldening them to try capitalizing on changing consumer needs and attitudes.

"This thing will ultimately be over," said Jeff Charney, senior vice president and chief marketing officer at Aflac in Columbus, Ga., referring to the recession, "and we want to be in a better position when it's over."

"Now more than ever, people need to hear from the duck," Mr. Charney said, because "if people really understood our products they would buy our products."

Aflac's supplemental insurance coverage, which pays a cash benefit to the insured, "is more relevant in today's world" of financial uncertainty, he added.

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The duck, introduced in 1999, has been tremendously successful in creating awareness of Aflac's brand, said Mr. Charney, who joined the company in November from QVC, where he was also chief marketing officer.

The next step is to use the character to help potential customers learn the Aflacts, er, facts about policies and other products.

"We want to make sure our icon is relevant to what's going on in people's lives right now," Mr. Charney said, when "they want facts, not fluff."

"They're untrustful today, for a lot of reasons," he added. "If you tell them the facts, they'll feel better about the brand."

That approach seems appropriate to Robert K. Passikoff, president at Brand Keys in New York, a research company that studies brand and customer loyalty.

The device of featuring a duck that cries "Aflac!" rather than quacking helped produce "high awareness" for Aflac, Mr. Passikoff said, which originally "needed to call attention to itself."

Now, as Aflac needs to address "a certain lack of clarity about precisely what it does," he added, the goals of the ads ought to become "engagement and understanding."

As for building up the role of the duck, which is derided by critics as a gimmick, Mr. Passikoff said he believed "it makes a lot of sense."

"Mickey Mouse, he's not," Mr. Passikoff said, "but he has become part of the popular culture."

That is underlined in an Aflac sponsorship promotion for "Up," a film that the Pixar Animation Studios division of the [Walt Disney Company](#) plans to open on May 29. Ads depict the duck, a balloon in his teeth, floating in the sky with the movie's main characters.

"He's got a lot of feathers in his cap," said Linda Kaplan Thaler, chief executive at the agency named after her, which created the duck.

As for the criticism of the character as juvenile and the mnemonic device of "Aflac!" as tiresome, Ms. Kaplan Thaler replied: "You do advertising for the public at large. We don't do our advertising for the advertising industry."

"We're introducing the duck in his professorial role, explaining what Aflac is and why you need it," she said. "It's a very 'ownable' way to get across information you want people to remember."

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The duck is taking on a new role as adman in the print part of the campaign, which shows him writing the text of magazine ads and posters with a special kind of pen — a feather, dipped in ink.

Although in the commercials “he is a duck of one word,” Ms. Kaplan Thaler said, in print “he’s finally getting it all out on paper.”

Asked if he may begin uttering more than “Aflac!” in the commercials, she replied: “That’s going to be up to him. Right now, the Aflacts speak for themselves.”

Aflac joins a long list of insurance companies that have stepped up marketing during the recession. Others include Geico, which introduced a character named Kash that symbolizes saving money, and Nationwide, which adapted its longtime theme, “Nationwide is on your side,” for a new campaign called “On your side.”

Aflac spent almost \$78.7 million to advertise in major media last year, according to TNS Media Intelligence, a unit of [WPP](#). That was a decline of 8 percent from the \$85.5 million spent in 2007, TNS reported, but an increase of 2.4 percent from the \$76.8 million spent in 2006.

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