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ADVERTISING

Absolut to Try Television Ads

By **STUART ELLIOTT**

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TO introduce a raspberry-flavored version of its flagship brand, the Absolut Spirits Company will boldly go where no Absolut vodka has gone before in the United States: onto television.

The campaign for Absolut Raspberri, the sixth flavored variety, will include four television commercials, scheduled to begin Monday on national cable networks like E, FX and VH1. The commercials are the first on TV in this country for Absolut, coming 13 years after a spot that ran during in-flight programming on the MGM Grand Air airline and four years after commercial vignettes started appearing on the Absolut Web site (absolut.com).

The expansion into television for Absolut is noteworthy because the success of the brand over the last two decades has been attributed almost entirely to a distinctive print campaign, which presents seemingly infinite variations of the unusual looking Absolut bottle and runs in hundreds of national and local magazines and newspapers.

During that time, Absolut has grown from negligible sales into the country's best-selling imported vodka and the No. 3 liquor brand over all, behind Bacardi rum and Smirnoff (domestic) vodka. But more recently, the American vodka market has become increasingly crowded, as brands like Grey Goose, Ketel One and Skyv have challenged Absolut.



To introduce Absolut Raspberri, its sixth flavor, the Absolut Spirits Company will advertise its namesake brand on television for the first time. The commercials show artists decorating 12-foot Absolut bottles. The familiar print campaign will continue as well.

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made their way onto TV, which is considered the most powerful medium because of its ability to reach large numbers of consumers quickly and frequently.

"The essence of the Absolut brand has been leveraged so creatively via print," said Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys, a brand and customer loyalty consulting firm in New York. "The folks at TBWA took advertising and made it an art form."

TBWA/Chiat/Day in New York, part of the TBWA Worldwide division of the Omnicom Group, has produced the Absolut campaign since 1981.

"But these days, the competition being what it is," Mr. Passikoff continued, "Absolut can't afford to ignore any opportunity." That is particularly true in seeking to reach free-spending, brand-fickle consumers ages 21 to 29, he said, calling them "the new generation so used to multimedia, especially cable TV and the Internet."

The commercials for Absolut Raspberri do not mean the brand is abandoning print. The spots are one element of a multifaceted campaign for the new flavor, with a total budget estimated at \$9 million to \$10 million, that also includes print, outdoor and interactive advertising as well as promotions. Indeed, the commercials, which show artists festooning the new flavor's bright red bottles with colorful designs, are intended to complement the print ads, which display the bottles after the artists have finished them.

"We look at it as bringing the print ads to life," said Carl Horton, president and chief executive of Absolut Spirits in New York, part of the V&S Absolut Spirits division of V&S Vin and Sprit of Sweden.

"Our campaign has continued to evolve over the years," he said. "TV is another part of the mix."

The budget for the campaign for Absolut Raspberri - which joins Peppar, Citron, Kurant, Mandrin and Vanilia, and the original - is about \$2 million more than Absolut Spirits spent last year to introduce the vanilla flavor with a campaign that did not include television.

The arrival of Absolut on American television - the brand is already sold on TV in Europe - is emblematic of a rapidly changing media landscape, particularly with the proliferation of cable networks offering original programming to challenge the traditional national broadcasters. Only since 1996, when the United States liquor industry lifted a decades-old voluntary ban on television and radio, have distillers been able to buy commercial time on the electronic media.

And only since late 2001 have such commercials become widespread. Today, although the big broadcast networks - ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC - still refuse liquor spots, they are accepted by more than two dozen cable networks, about 150 local cable systems and more than 420 local stations affiliated with the broadcast networks. Those outlets now run commercials by most major distillers, including Allied Domecq, Bacardi, Brown-Forman, Diageo and Sidney Frank Importing.

And in April, when Absolut Spirits brought out Level, a vodka priced higher than Absolut, it, too, was advertised on television.

"TV is a viable alternative for us, now that more and more cable networks are

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available for liquor advertising," said Matthias Aepli, vice president for marketing at Absolut Spirits. Other networks that will run the Absolut Raspberri commercials, which are scheduled to continue through December, include BET, Spike TV and USA.

One benefit of television that liquor marketers have long sought is its ability to "work faster as a medium to get the word out," said Patrick O'Neill, the group creative director for Absolut at TBWA/Chiat/Day. That can make it more effective than print for peddling new products.

The commercials "feel like a natural extension," he added, rather than a foray into TV for its own sake.

Each of the four 30-second spots begins by showing a 12-foot-high bottle of Absolut Raspberri on a stage resembling an artist's studio. The viewer then watches one of four artists - David Ellis, who is also the director of the commercials; Phil Frost; Maya Hayuk; and Kenji Hirata - making over the bottle in his or her own way as time-lapse photography chronicles the process.

Each spot ends with a fresh bottle and another artist about to take a turn using it as a canvas, suggesting a continuous skein of creativity.

The results of the artists' work - bottles covered in multicolored shapes resembling crystals, hearts and musical notes - are then displayed in the print and outdoor ads above the headlines "Absolut Release" and "Unleash the Raspberry."

"Print shows the outcome of creativity; it's done," Mr. O'Neill said. "TV can let you in on the process, show it coming to life."

Mr. Passikoff, the consultant, said he did not believe that Absolut's joining the ranks of liquor brands that advertise on television would dilute the image of an innovative leader, which the product has carefully developed over the years.

"It's only to Absolut's benefit" to be able to use TV, Mr. Passikoff said. "It's just the purists who are going to react less favorably."

The flavored segment of the vodka market is growing rapidly, and raspberry, which has previously been introduced by brands like Stolichnaya and Vox, is now ranked second among flavors after citrus.

The six flavors of Absolut account for more than 10 percent of its total shipments to the United States of four million cases a year, said Mr. Horton, the Absolut Spirits chief executive. Citron, the citrus variety, is the most popular Absolut flavor, he added, followed by Mandrin, the orange variety.

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