

Verizon opens fire on iPhone's 'geek chic' with the bad-boy Droid

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After teasing its forthcoming Droid **attack** on Apple's iPhone in an ominous TV **spot** earlier this month, Verizon Wireless has launched a print marketing **blitz** aimed at sowing the seeds of doubt into the hearts of potential iPhone buyers. The ads make it abundantly clear that Verizon Wireless, a joint venture of Verizon (**VZ**) and Vodaphone (**VOD**) and the largest wireless provider in the country, isn't going to stand back while Apple and AT&T reign over the smart-phone market.

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Below the surface of these ads, however, is an interesting study in shifting attitudes toward popular male identity. Verizon appears to be challenging a prevailing definition of "geek chic" sex appeal, lately personified by Justin Long's "Mac" character, Apple's blasé, hoodie-wearing hipster.

"The whole Justin Long thing is ready to transition out," says Sharon Ross, associate chair of the TV department at Chicago's Columbia College, the country's largest arts and media college. "As women have become stronger, they're looking for stronger men."

A closer look at these ads shows how they aim to topple the geek-chic sensibility. The first part of the "Droid Does" teaser on TV, which was produced by New York agency **McGarry Bowen** -- consists of pointing out how the iPhone fails to measure up: "In a world of doesn't, Droid does." The TV spot focuses on the things iPhones supposedly "can't" do. The print campaign goes on to jab the iPhone by boasting of what the Droid can do. "It hears. It knows," "Fast. Scary fast," and "It sees in the dark."

The text is juxtaposed beside a sleek-looking touch-screen device with a glowing red eye in the middle -- kind of like a cross between Hal from *2001* and the Eye of Sauron from *Lord of the Rings*. "Clearly, Verizon Wireless is trying to position the Droid directly against the iPhone and point out its weaknesses," says Robert Passikoff, Founder & President of Brand Keys, a marketing consultancy. "This is an introductory barrage."

Like a good capitalist combatant, Verizon Wireless is attacking the iPhone where it's most vulnerable: the sense that it's a too-precious-by-half device used by tech-snobs. No one disputes that the iPhone is very

cool and has radically changed the mobile market. But instead of engaging Apple's successful ad campaign featuring the hipper-than-thou Mac character condescending to the dorky, outdated PC nerd, Verizon Wireless is trying to short-circuit it entirely. And although Long appears in the Mac vs. PC ads, not the iPhone ads, he has come to represent the Apple sensibility Verizon Wireless is trying to undermine.

"The Verizon ad reminds me of *Bladerunner*," says Ross. "It seems like it might be delivering a subliminal message, with obtuse imagery that you can't quite decode. While the opening text could appeal to women, the second half -- the Droid part -- is very masculine. It has a very dark, aggressive tone."

Could it be that the era of the geek-as-sex-object is ending? The iPhone's ascendance could be seen as the pinnacle of geek chic -- an identity that began with the internet revolution of the '90s and continued with the Google guys, and other internet success stories. The dot-com boom made being a geek seem cool. And Net and tech start-up entrepreneurs -- especially if rich -- suddenly began winning the favor of women previously viewed as unattainable.

"It's the geeky guy's dream that the iPhone became the hottest thing ever," says Laura Reis of public relations consultancy Reis & Reis, whose partner and father is author of the key marketing textbook, *Positioning: The Battle For Your Mind*.

That's what made so much sense about Justin Long dating Drew Barrymore. Let's face it, pre-Apple, Long does not date Barrymore, the epitome of the uber-geek's dream girl. But post-iPhone, the two hook up and live out an on-again, off again, hipster-celeb existence on New York City's Lower East Side. In this world, being quick on the draw with your iPhone and the latest apps became sexier than being quick on the draw with your pistol or fastball.

But the Mac geek-chic image of male sexuality always remained tenuous, because the classic definition of masculine vigor -- tough, rebellious, dangerous -- never really went away, and probably never will. If Verizon Wireless is right, that guy is still out there -- and he's sick of the namby-pamby iPhone and all 85,000 of its irritating, useless apps, only five of which he'll regularly use anyway. Calling the proliferation of mobile applications "out of of control," Ross says, "there's definitely a backlash. Talking about your apps does have a pretentious quality to it. It's almost yuppie-like."

Maybe now, in the face of public exhaustion over war and a wrecked economy, an edgier version of male sexuality will resonate, Ross says. "I do think Verizon is responding to the general cultural tone of the country. The ad is very darkly themed, almost rebellious. People are pissed off."

In Verizon's world, iPhones are for wimps. "Go ahead," Verizon seems to be saying, "play with your iPhone and its terrible service and other limitations, you pansy. When you want to get a 'real' smart-phone built on an open platform with better service and slicker design -- and be a badass to boot, get a Droid."

Verizon is even setting Apple up as the very Establishment that Apple once challenged -- an Establishment that must now be confronted and disrupted. "Today, Apple is Big Brother, because they control all the applications, and they basically control the entire music industry," says Reis. In Verizon's world, Droid is the sledgehammer-wielding, rebel athlete from Apple's iconic 1984 ad destroying the machine that Apple and the iPhone have come to represent -- even though that notion is absurd, because Verizon Wireless is no more of an insurgent than Apple is.

The question, of course, is whether Verizon's attempt at revitalizing American males through their smart-

phones will catch on. But while Ross thinks women are ready for a new uber-male figure to replace Justin Long's iPhone-toting geek, she doesn't think American men are up to the challenge of providing one.

"Women are drawn to strong men, but I don't think men are ready for stronger women," Ross says matter-of-factly. "They still find them threatening."

What's more, Ross says Verizon runs the risk of alienating another critically important consumer: females. "Remember, women make the household decisions. Women still control the purse-strings as they have since about 1960," she says, though she acknowledges that dynamic is less at play with the iPhone, which is very much associated with the individual -- not the family cell-phone plan.

Both Ross and Reis agree that there's a significant untapped market consisting of what Reis called "the land between New York and Los Angeles," an area Reis thinks Apple has given short shrift. The young man in middle America isn't a bourgeois hipster; he may be more alienated, perhaps, more angry. He may not even be able to afford an Apple product or care about all those shiny apps.

Still, let's face it: Droid won't be stealing Jobs & Co.'s smart-phone crown any time soon. Passikoff says Apple ranks number one in Brand Keys's recent annual customer loyalty survey, which measures the degree to which a product or service meets or exceeds people's expectations. He added that Apple's Mac vs. PC campaign is still very much a hit, with Apple just launching a new line poking fun at **Windows 7**. And of course, some Apple partisans have **made their own mocking version** of the Droid Does ads.

"When you've got a campaign where people are willing to go online and see the videos, that's effective," he said.

Verizon Wireless is hoping people have grown tired of the iPhone shtick and will gravitate toward a device whose mascot isn't a slacker geek -- dating Drew Barrymore or not. It's a steep challenge. And if no company can mount a credible assault on the iPhone, the rest of the mobile industry might as well borrow a classic line from America's most famous **droid**, C3PO: "We're doomed."

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