

Post

April 2011
postmagazine.com



sound science

Audio pros create a 'big bang'
on the small screen

PLUS: *BATTLE: LA* - VFX & AUDIO FOR TV SERIES - ON-SET POST - EVOLVING POST STUDIOS

Promoting a brand with **character**

Zimmerman
and Hinge Digital
team up for
hhgregg.

PORTLAND, OR — Toucan Sam, the Trix Rabbit, Cap 'n' Crunch, Mr. Clean, the Geico Gecko — the list of animated characters that have resonated with audiences is long, and with the recent resurgence of modernized 3D characters, including Kraft's Mr. Peanut and Frito-Lay's Chester Cheetah, it is apparent that animated spokes-characters continue to be a highly successful way to develop a brand.

Congruent with this popular trend, regional appliance and electronics retailer hhgregg has found enormous success over the past 18 months with "hh," its fun and friendly CG mascot, developed by Fort Lauderdale, FL-based Zimmerman Advertising, with the help of full-service 3D animation and VFX studio Hinge Digital, based here.

Hhgregg's target demographic tends to skew toward a mature and affluent audience who are also avid newspaper readers. One of the campaign goals was to incorporate the two main marketing elements (TV advertising and the Sunday circular) in a memorable way. Hhgregg tasked Zimmerman to center the campaign around a new spokes-

years of character animation, development and advertising experience at studios including Sony, Laika and Disney — to further refine the overall design and move forward into 3D development. From there, they used Autodesk Maya, Mental Ray and the Adobe Creative Suite to complete animation tests in order to depict "hh" interacting in a live-action store environment.

The character poses and animation test from Hinge Digital convinced Zimmerman the value a 3D spokes-character could bring to the campaign. The project was then green-lit. "Hinge Digital gave life to 'hh,'" says Zev Auerbach, executive creative director at Zimmerman Advertising. "They should consider themselves very proud parents!"

BRINGING 'HH' TO LIFE

"Hh" was designed to resemble a rolled-up Sunday circular, keeping the nostalgia of traditional print media to appeal to existing demographics, but with a fun, contemporary feel. His appearance additionally emulates the company's logo both in color and style (his head is a golden orb representative of the yellow dot that is a part of the business' logo).

"Our goal was to develop the animation so that 'hh' was not completely over the top," explains Alex Tysowsky, Hinge co-founder/animation director. "He brings fun into the situation, but doesn't distract viewers from the store's atmosphere, or the associates and the knowledge that they share with the customers."

A character's movement and behavior is perhaps the most important part of the development process. To create an endearing personality, Hinge developed a range of facial expressions for the character that allowed his head to

remain perfectly round. A variety of recognizable poses were also necessary, which was a challenge since "hh" doesn't have arms, legs or a neck.

"We spoke with the Zimmerman creatives about the important features of the character: How would he move? How would his separate body parts interact with each other? For instance, would his circular body need to fold, or just roll up?" says Hinge Digital's co-founder/executive producer, Roland Gauthier. "We wanted to create an appealing spokes-character with

enough flexibility and range of performance to launch the campaign and continue to grow with each new spot."

The campaign's production schedule and workflow was another key component that needed to be considered when developing the mascot. Because hhgregg advertises special sales throughout the year, quick turnarounds for the broadcast commercials were necessary, often with multiple promotions in production at the same time. The production schedule can be as little as one week for a fairly straightforward ad, while more sophisticated productions involving complex effects and completely digital environments may take up to four weeks.

"To meet the creative and scheduling needs of the campaign, we developed a library of reusable 3D assets, including the character's key expressions and poses, as well digital versions of the hhgregg store interior and featured merchandise," explains Michael Kuehn, Hinge founder/VFX supervisor. "This allows us to efficiently and cost effectively repurpose digital assets in new creative scenarios, to complement and enhance existing live-action footage with featured products and visual effects, and recreate the hhgregg store environment for all-CG spots."

IMPACT

Comparing consumer research done right before the launch, to a follow-up done exactly 12 months after, Zimmerman saw a considerable increase in total ad awareness. The agency additionally noted a minor point increase in its comp markets, and in likelihood to revisit and recommend. Also, consumer perception of selection and salesperson knowledge in both the appliance and electronics categories experienced a noticeable rise. This has resulted in increased viewer retention across all mediums, including print, broadcast and online.

In 18 months, Zimmerman and Hinge Digital have expanded the idea of traditional character animation into overall brand identity and awareness. With "hh," they created an effective and modern spokes-character that delivers results, as well as a production workflow designed to create a steady stream of advertisements, on time and on budget.

Over the entire campaign, Hinge Digital has produced more than 30 commercials, and accompanying print collateral.



Hinge Digital — partners Mike Kuehn, Alex Tysowsky and Roland Gauthier — used Maya, Mental Ray and Creative Suite to create "hh."

character, to increase the aided and unaided awareness measures.

Zimmerman turned to Hinge Digital (www.hingedigital.com) for its expertise in character development and animation. The two companies worked together to show hhgregg the energy and personality that an animated mascot could bring to the brand.

THE WORKFLOW

After receiving the initial 2D "hh" designs from Zimmerman, Hinge Digital brought to bear their specialized skill set — based on