

Suburban Living



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Walt, left, Mark and Tim Smithe, photographed in their Arlington Heights store, take their furniture business seriously, but not themselves.

That's F-A-M-E, with an *E*

Call the Smithe brothers' commercials hokey if you want, but the ads are paying off big for the likable trio

BY JAMIE SOTONOFF
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Strangers sometimes walk up to Walt Smithe of Barrington Hills and start singing the song from his family's furniture company ads: "Walter E. Smithe, you dream it we build it."

Tim Smithe gets invited to guest star in radio and TV segments.

And Mark Smithe is handed his coffee every morning by a barista who says, "That's coffee for Smithe with an E."

People even dress up like them for Halloween.

That's what life is like now for the Smithe brothers, whose television commercials have transformed them from suburban businessmen into local celebrities.

The brothers are boosting their profiles — and sales at their 12 Chicago area stores — by spending millions of dollars on local television ads featuring themselves acting hokey.

(They declined to give specific dollar amounts for their advertising expenses or store sales).

Their most memorable commercials depict Walt, 44, Tim, 40,

and Mark, 39, doing parodies of "The Bachelor" and "The Apprentice." In their "Bachelor" spin-off, which generated the most calls and e-mails to the company's Itasca-based headquarters, Tim spontaneously offers a rose to one of his brothers, leaving the other empty handed.

In a different spot, they sing the company jingle together off-key, and in another, Tim and Mark imitate Walt by pasting on fake mustaches.

Dorky? Annoying? Some viewers and local radio DJs think so. Even Daily Herald TV Critic Ted Cox voted their 2003 Super Bowl ad the "Worst Local Commercial" because it didn't show any furniture, only the brothers tossing around a football.

During a recent interview at their new Drexel Heritage store in Arlington Heights (a new arm of the business), the Smithes shrugged off the criticism about their ads. As far as they're concerned, it's good just to have people talking about them.

"We dreamed of being water cooler topics ... and we may have just done that," Tim Smithe says.

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Most Walter E. Smithe Furniture TV ads are serious, but the few light-hearted ones have made a bigger impression. The Smithe brothers, pictured at left at Walt's 1981 wedding, have been best friends since they were kids.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SMITHE BROTHERS

Timmy Long, the Empire Carpet guy and other local legends, Page 4

Smithe: Dorky? Not to some

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Good business move

Make fun of them if you want — the fact is, the Walter E. Smithe Furniture ads are extremely effective, local advertising experts say.

Harper College assistant professor Maria Coons shows the commercials to students in her "Principles of Marketing" class as an example of ads that successfully appeal to their target market.

Coons says the Smithes attract the middle to upper class, 30- to 60-year-old demographic by mixing together themes of family, brotherhood and pop culture.

"Some people who aren't in that demographic might consider them dorky, but for their target market, they're not. For people who are in their 40s and have families, that's how brothers act around each other when they get together. Plus, they seem like nice guys," she says. "Then they tie in pop culture ... it shows that they're sort of a with-it furniture company."

Humor is always a risky proposition in advertising, Coons added. Some people will get it and like it, others will think it's dumb or offensive.

It's possible the Walter E. Smithe Furniture ads have turned off some potential customers who don't want to buy high-end, custom-made furniture from a bunch of guys who goof off on TV, advertising experts say.

But either way, the ads have successfully achieved something known as "recall" — after you watch the commercials, you can recall the name of the company and the products they sell. This,

some argue, is the whole point of advertising.

What viewers might not realize is that most of Walter E. Smithe Furniture's commercials are serious ads that feature only furniture. Of the 75-plus commercials they've aired in the past few years, it's the handful of campy ones that have stuck with people.

Pam Thorson, the company's director of advertising, admits she wasn't totally on board with the off-beat ad campaign at first.

"It's a very serious business. People are spending a good deal of money on some substantial purchases. And we don't want to minimize that or be loopy," she says.

But she agreed to give it a try. Right away, she saw how well people responded to the Smithes' faces and personalities. It wasn't long before she was receiving complimentary calls.

"I'm not joking. I've had random calls from people who leave messages that say, 'I love your commercials. And I'm not in the market for furniture right now, but when I am, I'm going to buy from you,'" she says. "People all say they seem like such nice guys ... and they are."

They also received a random e-mail from a Downers Grove woman who sent a picture of her 10-year-old son dressed up like the Smithe brothers for Halloween. He wore a suit and a mustache (to look like Walt), and attached cut-out pictures of the other two on each side of his face.

"That's when we knew we'd made it celebrity-wise," Tim said.

Showing their true selves on camera turned out to be a smart move, because the ads have

boosted sales, Thorson said.

"They're not trying to be salesman. They're not trying to be actors. They're not trying to be anything other than what they are. That's what really comes through," she says. "Their stiffness, geekiness ... that's realness. They become relate-able, I guess. It's like, they're one of us."

Putting a face or a personality on a company isn't always an easy thing to do. Just think of some of the unattractive car dealership owners you've seen, trying to tout their own business.

"Think of Dave Thomas (from Wendy's). Those commercials were never funny," says Chris Cancilla, vice president and group creative director at Frankel, a Chicago brand marketing agency. "Inherently, company owners don't have a sense of humor about themselves. So it's hard to pull it off."

How the ads started

The Smithes never intended the outtakes from their serious television commercials to appear on television. Rather, the footage of them stumbling on words, cracking up during takes or getting interrupted by a ringing phone was going to be a birthday present for their mother.

They had the outtakes spliced together, and just for laughs Tim showed it to an audience of 500 interior designers while giving a Power Point presentation.

"They loved it. It was an unexpected reaction," Tim says. "So in the speech, I said, 'Should I run this on TV?' And the response was unanimous. Then Mark and I talked about it, and we thought, we'll give it a shot."

The first of the ads ran two years ago. The response was so positive that the brothers started to script their own commercials. Tim likened it to the HBO show "Curb Your Enthusiasm," where they go in with a concept, not a script, and ad lib the dialogue.

"Overall, we're pretty bad actors," Tim says. "What we found was the more serious we tried to be, the funnier we were."

They started out with a serious demeanor when doing a photo shoot for this story. But it didn't last long. Tim and Mark



PHOTO COURTESY OF SMITHE FAMILY
Ever since they were kids growing up in Park Ridge, Walt, left, Tim and Mark Smithe have been best friends.

mocked Walt for wanting to fix his hair first ("Want me to get you some Aqua Net?") and Tim couldn't resist giving bunny ears to his brother, Mark, just as the camera snapped.

The brothers behave the same way in person as they do in the ads, says Hope Byrne, the youngest of the seven Smithe children and a Maine South High School alumni.

"It's uncanny how it captures their personalities. It is 100 percent them, and that's scary," she says.

Ever since they were kids growing up in Park Ridge, Walt, Mark and Tim have been best friends.

As teens, they worked together in their dad's and grandfather's furniture stores, sweeping showrooms in exchange for silver dollars. They attended Notre Dame High School for Boys in Niles together, and even though they went to different colleges, they remained close.

Then, one-by-one, each of the brothers returned home and started working in the family business.

The good-natured, brotherly teasing rarely stops. Even when interviewed for a Daily Herald story in 1995, on the company's 50th anniversary, Walt and Tim shoved Mark in front of a camera, joking that their then-single brother needed help finding a wife.

Today, the Smithe boys are all vice presidents — Walt handles merchandising, accounting and office functions; Tim is in charge of marketing and the sales force; and Mark is the company's attorney and manages the deliv-

ery and warehouse operations.

Their dad, Walter E. Smithe Jr., is semi-retired and living in Lake Barrington Shores but is still president of the company and pops in to the stores occasionally.

Even when the TV's off, the Smithes are very visible in the community. Walt is a trustee in Barrington Hills, and the company was involved in 140 local charity events last year. All three brothers work in the suburban stores, where the customers can see them, and Mark has been known to hop on a delivery truck to help deliver an order.

"Can you imagine him showing up to deliver your furniture? It's happened," Thorson says.

Being so approachable — and now, recognizable — people feel comfortable coming up to them and saying hi. The Smithes say they enjoy getting to meet the customers and that one-on-one contact is good for business.

"We take our business seriously, but we don't take ourselves seriously," Tim says.

What's to come?

Fans and foes can expect to see more of Walt, Tim and Mark on the small screen this summer.

Rumor has it that there will be a "Smithe Brothers Olympics" ad to correspond with the Athens games.

And, oh yeah, more ads featuring the store's furniture are also planned.

"There are going to be a lot more serious ads," Walt says, "but there's going to be enough fun to keep people's attention."

Remember these?

BY JAMIE SOTONOFF

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Television commercials only last for 30 or 60 seconds, but they can leave lasting impressions in our minds.

Remember these famous characters from local TV commercials?

- **The Victory Auto Wreckers guy.** He opens the door to his junker, it falls off, and then someone hands him a fan-shaped bundle of \$20 bills in exchange for his car.

This commercial has aired thousands of times on Chicago television — because the Bensenville business has run the exact same ad for the past 22 years. The commercial's been so effective, manager Kyle Weisner said, that they have no intention of making a new one.

The star of the commercial is Bob Zajdel, who, at the time, was a 22-year-old tow truck driver with Victory. Now 44, living in Elmwood Park and driving an 18-wheeler, Zajdel said he never dreamed this commercial would lead to local fame. He wasn't paid any extra money to appear in the commercial, other than his usual hourly pay.

"Am I a celebrity? To other people, maybe. But I'm still working for a living," he said.

- **The Empire Carpet guy.** For nearly 40 years, Lynn Hauldren has been telling us to call Empire Carpet (go ahead, sing it: 5-8-8, 2-3-hundred, Empire!)

Company officials ignored numerous calls inquiring about Hauldren's whereabouts, but in old televised reports, Hauldren told reporters he was enjoying retirement and was singing in a barbershop quartet. The Empire Carpet Man became such an icon, there were even Lynn Hauldren bobblehead dolls made.

- **Timmy Long, from Long Chevrolet.** Before the dealership closed its doors in the 1980s, annoying little Timmy Long used to shout "Extra, Extra!" while telling everyone about his family's dealership. And in one famous commercial, he gets a pie in the face.

- **Harry Schmerler, your singing Ford dealer.** Rock a bye your baby ... Harry always was singing a tune while telling the viewers about his great deals.

- **Cellozzi Ettleson, "where you always save more money."** The two Soprano-like car dealer owners appeared at the end of every commercial, waving hands full of cash.

- **The Menards guy.** Ray Szamanda has been encouraging people to "save big money" for the Wisconsin-based hardware store since 1976. He made as many as 300 commercials a year before retiring in 1998. He's now 78 years old.

- **Lynn Burton, "your TV Ford man."** Burton, who recently passed away, did ads for Burt Wyman Ford and Polk Brothers, which aired during the "Polk Brothers Late Night Movie."

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