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ADVERTISING

## 'Stimulus' Works Its Way to Madison Avenue

By [STUART ELLIOTT](#)

GENIUS, [Thomas Edison](#) said long ago, is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. Now, the geniuses on Madison Avenue are recalculating the formula to add a lot of stimulation.

As marketers remake campaigns to address the recession, advertising copywriters are liberally peppering prose with financial words and phrases, particularly "stimulus" and "[stimulus package](#)."

The choice of language reflects, of course, the attention paid to the passage by Congress in February of the \$787 billion economic stimulus measure. Like politicians, marketers like to ride coattails; the tactic of ads seeking to capitalize on news events or the popular culture is known as borrowed interest.

"It's a bit of an opportunistic practice," said Burt Alper, principal at Catchword Branding, a consulting company in Oakland, Calif.

"But if you're not being sympathetic to what's going on, your customers may view you as having blinders on," he added.

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As a result, there is no shortage of marketers trying to simulate the stimulation of a stimulus package. These are among scores of examples since the year began:

¶The [CBS](#) Television Network, part of the CBS Corporation, promoted its Monday sitcoms like "How I Met Your Mother" by calling them "the entertainment stimulus package."

There was also a "late-night stimulus package," composed of "Late Show With [David Letterman](#)" and "The Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson."

¶A commercial for Trojan condoms, sold by Church & Dwight, presented "our own stimulus package, the Trojan Pleasure Pack." The spot was created by the Kaplan Thaler Group in New York, part of the Publicis Groupe.

¶Valpak Direct Marketing Systems ran ads that described its Valpak coupon packets mailed to consumers as "the original consumer stimulus package since 1968."

¶[Carmike Cinemas](#) introduced a promotion, "Stimulus Tuesdays," offering moviegoers discounted drinks and popcorn.

¶In a print advertisement with a \$1 coupon for Uncle Ben's Ready Rice, sold by a unit of Mars, the Uncle Ben

character declared, “Consider this a part of the economic stimulus package.” The ads were created by the Playa del Rey, Calif., office of TBWA/Chiat/Day, part of the TBWA Worldwide division of the [Omnicom Group](#).

Coincidentally, the ad is part of a campaign for Uncle Ben’s that carries the theme “Ben knows best” — no reference intended to [Ben S. Bernanke](#), chairman of the [Federal Reserve](#).

¶An ad for a new business book, “The Carrot Principle,” published by the Free Press division of Simon & Schuster, redefines the incentive behind using carrots rather than sticks as motivational tools by asking, “Heard about the carrots stimulus package?”

¶The Baltimore Orioles have a “Birdland Stimulus Package” for the 2009 baseball season, which enables fans to celebrate birthdays with free tickets to games at Oriole Park at Camden Yards ([orioles.com/birthdays](#)).

¶Gold’s Gym is introducing a “Fitness Stimulus Package” that includes free seven-day passes, health audits and exercise guides ([goldsgym.com/stimulus](#)).

“Putting the stimulus spin on this is timely,” said Lisa Zoellner, chief marketing officer at Gold’s Gym in Dallas, because the state of the economy “is going to be absorbing people’s attention for quite some time.”

Most stimulus lingo is turning up in campaigns for marketers in categories hardest hit by the recession. They include automobiles, like invitations from the Volvo unit of [Ford Motor](#) to “stimulate your stimulus”; retail, like a “stimulus sale” at ABC Carpet & Home stores; and travel, like a “stimulus, recovery and rebound package” at the Mohegan Sun casino and hotel in Uncasville, Conn.

“When people hear ‘stimulus package,’ they think of the government,” said Tom Koenigsberg, chief marketing officer at CiCi’s Pizza in Coppell, Tex. “It’s time business provided stimulus packages to give consumers a chance to save money.”

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CiCi’s recently began a promotion, the “Million-Penny Stimulus Package,” in which that many pennies — bearing stickers offering prizes like free meals — are being scattered around CiCi’s restaurants. The promotion is being advertised in a campaign celebrating “penny picker-uppers,” created by the Marina del Rey, Calif., office of Deutsch, part of the [Interpublic Group of Companies](#).

“I think the way we’ve done it is to be a little different, a little more creative, hopefully separating us from the others out there,” Mr. Koenigsberg said.

That brings up a major drawback to ads that borrow interest: They tend to proliferate to the point they seem derivative and unoriginal.

“You can get lost if people think you’re just co-opting something they see on the news,” said Alain Sylvain, managing director at Redscout in New York, a brand strategy company owned by MDC Partners.

Rather, marketers ought to strive “to make it much more about empathy,” he added, “to say: ‘We understand what’s going on. We sympathize with you. We know what you’re looking for.’ ”

That is why [Domino's Pizza](#) included value deals in ads featuring a make-believe federal secretary of taste offering a “Taste Stimulus Package” and a “Big Taste Bailout.”

“It seems like every ad starts out, ‘In this economy ...,’ ” said Andrew Keller, partner and co-executive creative director at the Boulder, Colo., office of the Domino's agency, Crispin Porter & Bogusky, also part of MDC.

“We have an opportunity to offer something around value,” he added. “It's doing something, rather than just trying to ride the wave of news.”

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