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Prevention group helps shelve suicide commercials

By Ross Daly

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Suicide prevention groups are welcoming decisions by two carmakers to pull ads with suicide themes.

Both GM and Volkswagen have run recent ads revolving around suicide, "not something we need to show as a mass marketing ploy," according to Lawrence D. Sprung, chairman of the Long Island chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

GM ran its suicide ad during the Super Bowl; it showed a despondent robot out of work after dropping a part at the factory. In a dream, the robot throws itself from a bridge.

Volkswagen's ad, which ran last week, depicted a man on a ledge who decides against killing himself after learning he can buy a new Volkswagen for under \$17,000.

That a person contemplating suicide would stop because of a car price is "absurd," Sprung said.

"It desensitizes people," he said, adding that the ads alone wouldn't cause any suicides, but could lead someone who is already suicidal to consider the option.

Sprung, the president of financial planning firm Mitlin Financial in Melville, became involved with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention after the 2004 suicide of his 27-year-old brother-in-law.

In the U.S., about 80 people a day commit suicide and another 1,500 attempt it, according to the foundation.

Sprung found the GM Super Bowl ad especially insensitive given that Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy's 18-year-old son, James, killed himself just over a year ago.

"It was a slap in the face," Sprung said.

GM and Volkswagen pulled their ads after receiving complaints from mental health organizations, including the foundation, which funds research, education and treatment programs.

Pulling the ads was "wise," said Chuck McMellon, associate professor of marketing and international business at Hofstra University's Zarb School of Business. Companies facing controversy over advertising generally react as soon as interest groups complain, he said.

"If it gets to the general public, it's awful," McMellon said. "That's what they don't want and that's why they get rid of them."

GM delayed several days before announcing it would edit its robot ad to remove the suicide scene. After receiving complaints, Volkswagen pulled its ad the day it debuted.

Advertisers are becoming more and more sensitive to controversy of any kind, McMellon noted. A Snickers ad that ran during the Super Bowl showed two mechanics reacting with revulsion after accidentally kissing each other while eating the same candy bar; the ad was pulled after it was denounced as homophobic.

In such cases, the right strategy is to pull the advertisement, apologize and bring the controversy to an end swiftly, McMellon said. In the past few years, interest groups have gained more clout when it comes to forcing advertisers to heed their concerns, he said, attributing part of that to the power of the Internet.

McMellon said that in discussing the effectiveness of Super Bowl ads with his Hofstra students, concerns about suicide didn't come up. He's sure that despite extensive approval processes, that was the case with GM and Volkswagen as well.

"The intention of the advertiser was not to be mean-spirited or make fun of suicide," he said.

Still, he couldn't recall suicide being used before as an advertising theme.

"It's just one of those subjects that you leave alone," McMellon said.

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