Incongruity in Advertising?

November 30, 2011 by Steve Baird

My post from a couple of days ago, commenting on Chick-fil-A's EAT MOR CHIKIN slogan and the associated Cow Campaign and advertisements, neglected to discuss an issue -- one so important -- that I'm compelled to raise it now, as it appears to have disturbed my otherwise healthy cognitive system.

It has disturbed me as much as one of my amphibian-loving sons was disturbed by what I imagine is a local Geek Squad competitor in Minnesota called Tech-Toads, having the following logo:

As we drove by the new store-front signage in Maple Grove, he remarked: "That makes no sense, that's a frog, not a toad." I asked how he knew, but he was confident that "only frogs catch insects with their sticky tongues, not toads." Out loud I'm saying, "nice catch, son," because I'm thinking inside "what do I know," but later I'm looking for answers online (and good blog-fodder).

As it turns out, toads actually do "catch food with their long skinny tongues," sorry son. Perhaps it was the color of the amphibian that threw him? Come to think of it, I don't believe I've seen a toad with such a vibrant green color before either. Or, perhaps it was the absence of dry, leathery skin?

Whatever the reason, the incongruity I saw in the name, logo, and underlying business wasn't related to leathery skin, sticky tongues, or color, it was based on my association of the word "toad" as seriously lacking in speed, which is a quality and feature cleverly made fun of in the world of computer services and internet access (thanks, Comcast), at least when speed just isn't there.
But I digress, back to the cows. The cause of my disturbed cognitive system concerning the Chick-fil-A cows has been: Aren't they supposed to be protesting Holstein dairy cows?

In other words, the kind of cows that have udders that are milked for milk, not beef?

And, if so, why should these cows be obsessing over how much chicken is eaten by the public, as compared to beef? It isn't their problem, no self-interest to preserve here, I'm thinking.
To make matters worse, my suspicions of incongruity and growing conspiracy, were only fueled by the fact that every Chick-fil-A cow I could find online had a placard or something else obstructing any visual confirmation of what glands should be present in that general anatomical vicinity, if my Holstein suspicion was correct:

Yet once again, my hopes of documenting another example of incongruity in advertising was dashed, as soon as I learned that apparently there is a market for Holstein beef after all.

In the end, my obsessive quest for exposing a conspiracy and identifying evidence of another incongruity in advertising, naming, or visual identity, may have been flawed from the start, as so eloquently explained by John Furgurson of BrandInsightBlog, only weeks ago:

"Incongruity in advertising is a mismatch between an element in the ad (product, brand, endorser, music, word, photo, etc.) and an existing frame of reference."
Academic research on the subject has shown that 'incongruity causes disturbances in one’s cognitive system'…
That's precisely what advertising people are going for; a disturbance in your thinking that causes you to pause, consider or reflect on the brand.
'Empirical evidence suggests that individuals presented with incongruity are more likely to engage in detailed processing than they are with congruity, and may even respond positively to the incongruity.' On the other hand, ads, tweets, presentations and websites that contain nothing new or different will not be processed at all."

Perhaps just a hint of false incongruity is the best of both worlds for a marketer. In the end, it can be defended as not actually being incongruous, for those that care, but up until the very end of that debate, there can be a lot of discussion and reflection, or at least self-debate, as this longer-than-anticipated blog post alone as demonstrated.

So, where do you stand on intentionally "disturbing cognitive systems" and the broader strategic issue of using incongruity in advertising, naming, and visual identity?