

# We're sorry

What if A&P's new humble pie ad campaign were to prove catching?

by JEFF GREENFIELD

**T**he disembodied voice solemnly recites the confession while the A&P symbol fills the television screen:

A&P has always stood for two things:

Price and pride.

Price and pride together made the great A&P great.

Then, somehow, we let price and pride get out of balance.

We forgot our own philosophy: *price without pride* is no bargain.

And we suffered for it.

Thus is fired the opening gun of a \$10 million television campaign, buttressed by full-page ads in newspapers around the country, to make A&P once again a profitable leader in the hearts of America's shoppers. Specifically, the campaign is an attempt to recover from A&P's disastrous attempt to convert itself into a "discount" supermarket through its "WEO" effort (WEO stood for "Where Economy Originates"), an attempt that cost the chain millions of dollars and its long-held supremacy among food chains. Safeway is now the largest.

What makes the A&P approach so fascinating, however, is its tone: a \$700 million-a-year enterprise openly acknowledging a mistake in judgment and a failure. It is not a "first." A few years back, the Ford Motor Company used a spokesman who mentioned the Edsel as proof that the company was not perfect; and in 1969, New York mayor John Lindsay talked of his "mistakes" in a reelection ad. (The mistakes he acknowledged did not include fiscal mismanagement.) Indeed, candor seems to be a hot political commodity. With Betty Ford speaking publicly of her sexual affection for her husband, Jack Ford acknowledging his use of marijuana, and Abe Beame admitting partial responsibility for New York's plight, the admission of human foibles may be as

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important to candidates as a dog and an American flag.

But the specter of so big a company admitting so fundamental a mistake — and admitting that it has *suffered* because of that mistake — raises some intriguing possibilities for the future. If the anticorporate, skeptical, Naderite consumer really wants his corporations self-effacing and contrite, we may be in for television commercials like these:

□ "I'm Ed MacMahon, and most of you know me as a happy, easygoing fellow who will laugh at Carson if Johnny clears his throat. But tonight, I'm in a serious mood — deadly serious. Because the folks at General Motors have asked me to tell you how sorry they are.

"Now it's bad enough that for years we agreed with Ford and Chrysler to

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hold back developments on pollution control . . . or that we helped to wipe out the mass transportation system of Los Angeles . . . or that we helped encourage planned obsolescence which wasted incredible amounts of manpower, energy, and raw materials.

"But on top of that, we made the Corvair. And when Ralph Nader tried to talk about its problems, we hired a detective to follow him.

"Now General Motors wants another chance. And the way you can help make sure we never do this again is to buy our cars — and *only* our cars — to show that you appreciate a company that's big enough to admit when it's wrong. And believe me, folks, G.M. is big enough."

□ "Hi, Johnny Cash here for America's railroads. Ya know, back when my granddaddy was no higher 'n a hubcap on a semi, the railroads pretty much had things their own way: coolie labor, company towns, shipping rates that bled the farmers dry, legislatures we bought 'n' sold like popcorn . . . yep, those were mighty high times.

“Well, then came the New Deal, the auto-mo-bile, the trucks and buses, and the suburbs. And now the railroads are on the ropes. Bankruptcies, insolvencies, mergers, Amtraks and Conrails . . . once we had lowers and uppers, but now we’re just on our uppers.

“Well friends, here’s your chance to really let us have it. As you know, we lose money on every passenger train we run. So be a part of this railroad rip-off. You can put us further into debt and despair by riding the railroads every chance you get. After all the years we took you for a ride, why not take us for a ride real soon?”

□ (*Desolate, stained beach with oil-covered birds*) “These gulls will never fly again. This beach will take years to restore. This water is foul. The entire quality of life for thousands of Californians will be poorer . . . for months if not years.

“We’re Continental Oil, and we care. Why do we care? Because it was our oil that spilled onto this beach and caused this damage to our environment. And we’re sorry. Why are we sorry? Because this spill, and others like it, helped make the environmental movement what it is today — a real pain in the butt. Yes, instead of a few bird-watchers and other loonies, thousands and thousands of people are organizing to stop offshore oil drilling, strip-mining, pipelines, and all the other things we need to prosper and grow.

“So when we tell you we’re never going to permit another oil spill like this one, you can believe us. Because we want to make as much as we can. And the only way to make all that money is to make sure this never happens again — so we can concentrate on getting our tax shelters back. Yes, America — the next time you see an oil slick on your beach, remember — Continental Oil *is* sorry about that.”

□ (*A herd of rampaging bears*) “Merrill Lynch is bearish on America. That’s right, investors. Remember all



*The price-and-pride duo in A & P's television commercial*

those bulls we threw at you a year or two back? Well that’s exactly what it was — a lot of bull. Who knew from Arab oil embargoes? Who knew from Russian wheat deals? Who knew from 12 percent inflation, record-high interest rates, the failure of the Peruvian anchovy catch?

“Yes, America, Merrill Lynch knows better now: our economy is headed right down into the privy, where it’s going to stay for a long, long time to come. So try diamonds, pork belly futures, gold bars, canned foods, and a good old Winchester parked near your attic window when the collapse comes. And what about all those dandy stocks we touted for all those years? Listen — if we *really* knew what stocks were going up and what stocks were going down, would we be in this cockamamy business?”

And finally, the commercial that is surely going to show up one night, during the *Late, Late Show*, in between the “Great Polka Hit” ad, the “Fabulous Fifties” ad, the “Sensational Sixties” ad, and the “Frantic Forties” ad. A well dressed man, standing on a beach in southern California:

□ “Hi, remember me? I recorded some of the most famous tapes in American history. And now, through a special one-time-only offer, you can enjoy these incredible tapes that are not available in any record store. [cough] Pardon me — heh, heh. Yes, you’ll hear all those favorites that sparked headlines from San Clemente to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. To get these tapes, just send several thousand dollars in unmarked bills to the third telephone booth from the right at the Encino Airport, and. . . .” ■