

[Sign Up Now](#)

Join the ad industry's #1 resource.

Remember me
[Forgot password?](#)

*Not required

[News](#) [Special Features](#) [Newsletter](#)



Funny Business 2015

Anthony Vagnoni

Comedy, Still King, Morphs into New Lengths and Formats as Ad Industry Realigns



Dudes struggle with how to approach their super-sized BK special sandwiches in Synthetic's comedy spot.

This year's line-up of warm and fuzzy Super Bowl spots notwithstanding, comedy is still king (or queen) when it comes to advertising. Humor, silliness and sight gags are firmly entrenched not just in the ad lexicon, but in every aspect of mass media, from the growth of goofy YouTube videos to hilarious stop-motion animated Vines to feature films and the continued strength of the time-tested TV sitcom format.

Still, what passes for funny adapts with the times, and that's no different for advertising than other pop culture

forms. So the hard-edged slapstick comedy commonplace in commercials a few years ago has ebbed, and the dude humor (think farting horses and dogs biting crotches) that typified Super Bowls of years past is gone, chased away by the threat of Twitter backlashes and other self-correcting social media scorns.

What's left is an interesting mix, often lying somewhere between funny and cute: in today's comedy cosmos there's traditional comedy TV spots along with oddball characters, pseudo-viral videos, no shortage of talking animals and of course celebs everywhere.

To take a wider look at the genre, we assembled a list of suitably rib-splitting sponsor companies to weigh in with their opinions. Leading off is **Synthetic Pictures**, the L.A., New York and Austin, TX-based company founded by Director **Justin Corsbie** and EP **Allison Smith**, which works not just in comedy but a wide

[Special Feature: View All](#)



Funny Business 2015

Synthetic Pictures' Justin Corsbie is One Serious Student of Comedy

GO Taps a Cavalcade of Comic Writer/Directors for Brand Stories

8th Street's 'Any Where, Any Time' Mantra Makes Friends

Comedy is Easy, Advertising is Hard, as Our Showcase Reveals



< Back to News Back to top

range of styles for clients across the country (that's a frame from his comedy series pilot, "Hot Dogs & Hand Grenades," at the top of this story); **GO**, the L.A.-based production company headed by Managing Director Gary Rose, which is home to the celebrated improvisation specialist **Christopher Guest** as well as a quintet of other comedy directors; and **8th Street Productions**, the L.A.-based company founded by Director **Jonathan Nowak** and EP **Steve DeVore**, which takes a scrappy, indie film approach to working for agencies and brands.



Also on our roster is **Hootenanny**, the Chicago-based creative editorial boutique run by Editor and President **Liz Tate** and EP **Don Avila** that's home to the comedy-focused Editor **Sean Halvorsen**; and **First Wave**, the New York-based production company led by Executive Producer **Justin Havlik** that represents the inimitable parodist **'Weird Al' Yankovic** for advertising assignments, along with directors like **Kit Lynch-Robinson** of the BBC's "Top Gear" and hidden-camera guru **Michael Addis**, among others.



A Cornucopia of Comedy Commercials

This gaggle of companies has been on a tear, working on a range of assignments that run the stylistic gamut.

Synthetic's Justin Corsbie is working on a project for Nissan and Infiniti that he describes as a "great mix of comedy, dialogue and visual storytelling." He shot two **Burger King** campaigns last year that allowed him to collaborate closely with the creative team at Pitch and work in an improv style. And on a recent package for the health insurance company Wellmark BC/BS, he cast in Chicago and tapped Katie Rich from Second City right before she was hired for "Saturday Night Live."



GO's writer/director team Beautimus pulls off an unexpected comic surprise in this spot for HP.

At **GO** – where the comedy directors come out of an entertainment background – director Christopher Guest just wrapped a new campaign for **PetSmart** that broke on the Academy Awards. **Jeff Tomsic**, whose work is seen regularly on Comedy Central, recently shot a comedy ad for the **PGA** that features pro Bubba Watson. **Tyler Spindel**, fresh off his work on "Chelsea Lately," created a little havoc at a **Del Taco** restaurant. **Richie Keen** has been busy with his work on the FX series "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" between ad assignments. The writer/director team known as **Beautimus** concocted an ingenious bit of work-from-home cheating in a video for **HP**. And **Crubin**, a New York-based director with a flair for dark comedy, shows us that there really are monsters in the closet in a "Crash The Super Bowl" spot for **Doritos**.

8th Street Director **Jonathan Nowak's** "Another Reason Y" campaign for the Greater Twin Cities YMCA and agency **Preston Kelly** earned tons of publicity. Their **Hormel "Driven By Bacon"** campaign out of **BBDO Minneapolis** documented the cross-country road trip of a guy riding a motorcycle fueled by bacon grease. And their "Back to Wha?!" campaign for **Sears and Olson** was a collection of nine quirky 15 to 20-second videos shot in a week's time.

At **Hootenanny**, **Liz Tate** reports they've been busy with range of editorial and post assignments for agency clients. "But we've also created some very funny branding spots for our company, the 'Hootenanny shorts,' that were conceived and directed by our **Sean Halvorsen**," she says. "These have given us a fun way to create entertaining content that establishes an identity for our company and drives people to our site and social media pages. It's a great way to show our creativity, not just in the editing realm, but also in conceiving, directing and visual effects."



First Wave Director Michael Addis pranks a barber shop customer with an almost-blind barber in this spot for Doritos.

Justin Havlik's crew has been busy as well. 'Weird Al' **Yankovic** took over social media a short time back with his wildly-popular parodies of **Pharrell's "Happy," Lorde's "Royals"** and **Iggy Azalea's "Fancy."** **Michael Sugarman** just completed a project for **Comic Relief** and **PG Tips** and **Michael Addis** did a promo campaign for the **Bravo** reality series "Vanderpump Rules" that includes a hidden camera prank with series star **Stassi Schroeder**. And **Kit Lynch-Robinson**, whose work has won Lions at Cannes, is known for his ability to handle large scale productions, product demos, stunts, automotive, experiential and interactive

media.

Comedy's New Visual Language

So in this age of Vine and YouTube, what's driving comedy content today? "The YouTube stuff has definitely crept in," says Corsbie. "So has the user-generated, found footage, hidden camera, 'make it look like it was shot on an iPhone' visual approach that it helped spawn. We must have seen 30 jobs last year where that was the visual directive, and I'm just talking about comedy. That's not counting the countless visually-driven projects that called for 'observational, in the moment, cinema vérité realism.'"

Corsbie believes this kind of request is driven by clients, who often seek the style du jour. "You get a script for a 15-second comedy and dialogue spot set in a store, and the client's visual reference is a 90-second lifestyle spot, shot over-cranked and handheld with lens flares in breathtaking exotic locations. How on earth – and more importantly, why – do you apply that visual language to a comedy and dialogue spot set in a florescent-lit store," he asks with a chuckle. "We do everything in our power to pull it off for the client, but it often requires creative tap-dancing to address those types of requests and still focus on the humor, which is always THE critical element." He adds with a laugh, "I work really hard to avoid saying stuff like, 'that's probably the worst idea since that musical about the Holocaust.'"

"I think many people are trying to embrace technology to reach a specific demographic," observes GO's Gary Rose. "But as a million people have said before me, it's a story that engages the viewer, no matter what the distribution model is. Good comedy connects, whether highbrow, dry, or broad; it becomes about nuance and taste. I believe directors working on successful contemporary comedic TV shows are in touch with what viewers will respond to. And understanding timing is critically important to the work being successful. A pile of whacky stuff is not necessarily going to be funny. It's all in how it's crafted."

The Sharing Economy

The flood of media channels that allow comic content to be passed around are having a huge influence, some contend. "There are so many different avenues and platforms to share, send, build, etc.," says 8th Street's DeVore. "Generally, I think advertising stays within the boundaries of traditional comedy structures, but I think this can and will change. As pop-culture evolves, things just become acceptable. And when that bubbles to the surface, we're able to get away with more from a creative standpoint; it allows more freedom to get funkier and dabble in more off the wall opportunities."



Cement overshoes won't slow down this guy, who swims away from peril thanks to his YMCA classes in a spot from 8th Street Productions.

As for influences, Nowak claims "they're all over the map – there's no single source any longer. References run the gambit as well. And I love that. One project may be suitable for YouTube while another is more influenced by mainstream TV. It makes it not only interesting, but challenging, too."

Hootenanny's Sean Halvorsen says he's not seeing that strong a YouTube and Vine influence in how the comedy is presented in advertising. "Those sites are great and extremely popular, but they're more of a distribution channel than a source for style, feel or tone," he observes. "That's what I and my fellow editors here are seeing from the work we've cut recently."

He cites as an example a campaign for FCB and Cox Communications "that relied heavily on situational and character-based comedy to tell stories. And a project for Clorox, created by The Onion's in-house agency, Onion Labs, parodied documentary shows like 'Wild Kingdom' to dramatize and heighten what would be mundane, everyday situations where you'd need Clorox bleach. So I think on the creative side, advertising comedy tends to stick to more traditional models."



Editor Sean Halvorsen shot and edited this comedy short "After Dark," which turns Hootenanny into a singles chat line.

First Wave's Justin Havlik says that marketers, always quick to piggyback on a trend, have begun turning to home-grown web video stars as ways to leverage their popularity. "They're willing to pay these internet celebs big bucks to create sponsored content because of their followings on Instagram, Vine, YouTube, etc. They're also integrating brands into sitcoms, award shows and major sporting events. Basically, they're going wherever there are a ton of eyeballs."

He cites an example where First Wave was asked to write a series of videos for a promotion designed to give consumers a chance to go to the Super Bowl, where they'd congregate in the stands to help form what was billed as 'The Largest Human Doritos Chip.' "The idea paid off and went viral, as *The New York Daily News* picked it up as a feel-good news item. We love projects that give back to the consumer and elicit pure joy. You can see it on their faces and reactions."

Viral Video's Impact

As several sources note, the fact that comedy videos seem to have become the Bitcoin of the digital video – grumpy cats, anyone? – has affected how comedy scripts are being conceived, which impacts everything else down the line. This explains the rash of punk'd brand videos that were the rage for a while, and the ongoing popularity of hidden-camera or found footage concept. But where's this trend going?

"It's certainly a relevant style for now, and it has a place, but like all things it can be overdone and played out," says Corsbie. "I feel like we're reaching that point, and something new is going to break through soon."

Hootenanny's Halvorsen might agree; he feels that often there's an effort to garner social media hits that can make work feel contrived. "Anytime you add something in an ad or film just to make it feel like a 'viral video' or to generate likes, it runs the risk of coming off as not being authentic, and I think people pick up on that quick," he notes. "If it's genuinely funny, then people will see it, and if enough people see it, it'll go viral. Going out to produce something just to go viral is kind of like going about it backwards. Original creative should always come first."

And despite the apparent spontaneity of achieving virality, producers know it takes several factors to make this work. "Every client wants the work to reside online and spread, but budgets can determine whether or not the spot airs on TV *and* goes viral," says DeVore. "The boards don't tell you that; it's the budget that tells us where that spot or work will live."



"Modern Family" bombshell Sophia Vergara vamps it up with Chelsea Handler in this promo from GO director Tyler Spindel.

Agencies and clients need to understand that, even when dealing with lower-budget projects, there needs to be some basic requirements to give comedy projects the best chance to succeed this way. "We can't make the stuff go viral by the way a board looks, or even if a client specifically asks for that," DeVore says. "We still need the manpower and talent and the ability to work a budget upside down and inside out. The work has to be executed well – viral or not. While online comedy has impacted advertising as a whole, the best agencies are more familiar with the difference between the budgets behind a 'viral' board versus a TV board. Our job is to work with clients and brands at all levels to partner on the creative and post, so as not to let the standard of the work be jeopardized."

Directorial and Editorial Impact

With all that's changed about how ad content is created these days, when anyone with a camera phone is suddenly a 'director,' has the role of directors and editors who work in the comedy genre been affected? Are great performances and deft timing still the key?

"I don't think the roles have changed too much when creating something funny for brands or agencies, as opposed to creating a film or short for themselves," says Halvorsen. "Comedy needs to be funny, and agencies hire a particular director or editor to make that spot work. I do think that sometimes brands and agencies need to trust the directors, editors and writers they hire to make the spot as funny as it can be. Second-guessing the creative later usually leads to a mediocre spot."

GO's Rose might add that there's a degree of trust – he calls it bravery – which great comedy demands. "If you're not willing to push the comedy," he says, "it just becomes part of the white noise."



Soccer star Clint Dempsey has a lame videogame player show off his moves in this First Wave spot for Game Stop.

Havlik believes the combined contributions of director and editor can add significantly to a comedy spot's odds. "The choice of the editor, along with their respective company, tells us a lot about the project," he says. "Most of the time the editor has been selected prior to the director search. This builds excitement among the directors, who know that their final work will be elevated and their vision realized, along with the agency's."

And while Synthetic's Corsbie feels that performance and comedic timing are still crucial, "being able to handle VFX is important too, and the ability to 'plus' the script is now a required part of the job. Comedy boards seem less and less developed, and directors are routinely asked to write lines, concept visual gags and basically help create the comedy itself. I enjoy that, because I'm a writer and I like to collaborate with creatives this way."

Future Funny

How is the comic form evolving in advertising? It's been a staple since the days of sixty-second ads and network dominance. Where's it going?

One direction predicted is that, more and more, it will resemble narrative rather than sketch humor. "As we produce longer format content pieces, directors will be able to exploit character development and story arc," says GO's Rose. "Online components are now part of almost everything we do, and in many instances that's where you find the best part of the work. If you take the plumber film Christopher Guest directed for [Ford Transit](#), it's a complete story. You could technically define three acts. We get to know the characters, and there's a definite beginning, middle and an end."

"I think we're finally moving past the sophomoric comedy we saw in past years," notes Hootenanny Editor Liz Tate, "where it seemed every joke centered on someone getting punched to trigger the laugh. I'm seeing more comedy that relies on the unexpected moment to entertain the audience, and I'm all for that. Don't get me wrong though – I like a good sight gag as much as the next gal."

"And the comedy form is spreading everywhere," adds DeVore. "Even cultures not known for having the greatest sense of humor are 'victims of comedy.' People love to laugh. And since some people laugh at things that others don't, and vice versa, we therefore need a lot of comedy in all kinds of styles and genres."



"I feel strongly that comedy is the most effective approach to short form storytelling and advertising," he sums up. "It'll continue to be a mainstay, and will continue to change regularly because comedy is a fickle bi-atck. But any way you cut it, funny is still funny. As Mary F'ing Poppins says, a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."

That said, expect to see more comic situations that feel as though they're pulled from real life, too. "We'll see more work that's believable and genuine," says Corsbie. "I think broad and over the top is cheesy and long gone...thank God. It's funny when it's true."

▶ [Chapter 1: Synthetic...](#) ▶ [Chapter 2: GO](#) ▶ [Chapter 3: 8th Street...](#) ▶ [Chapter 4: Showcase...](#) ▶ [Cover](#)

[Home](#)
[Sign Up](#)

[Services](#)
[Advertise With Us](#)

[News & Features](#)
[Breaking News](#)
[Newsletters](#)
[Articles](#)

[Special Features](#)
[Schedule](#)
[Archives](#)

[Spots](#)
[People](#)
[Companies](#)
[Agencies](#)
[Music Videos](#)
[The Scout](#)

[Contact](#)
[Add Spots](#)
[Jobs](#)

Sign-up for our newsletter

Your email

[Send](#)

[Check out our newsletter](#)

© 2015 Extreme Reach