

ENVIRONMENT

Ad for a Dish Detergent Becomes Part of a Story

By LESLIE KAUFMAN JUNE 15, 2010

In mid-April, the makers of Dawn liquid dish detergent started running TV commercials that played up its reputation as the soap of choice among nonprofit groups that clean birds and marine mammals harmed by oil spills.

The advertisement, with blackened baby otters and ducklings emerging cleansed by a Dawn bubble bath, had run intermittently since last summer. More of the ads were being played as **Earth Day** neared, on April 22.

Two days before Earth Day, the Deepwater Horizon exploded in the Gulf of Mexico.

The timing was an odd twist for the marketers of Dawn, who are watching their commercials recreated in TV news reports about hapless birds covered in oil, creating an accidental — and uneasy — bit of product placement.

The number of damaged birds, dead or alive, collected and cataloged by the federal authorities has soared in recent weeks to nearly 1,400 as of Tuesday. The live ones are brought to be cleaned, and cameras now routinely catch images of Dawn bottles in the background as brown pelicans and laughing gulls are being washed.

“It is a tough thing,” said Susan O. Baba, a spokeswoman for Dawn, made by the consumer products giant **Procter & Gamble**, which has sent 7,000 bottles of the detergent to the gulf at no charge and plans as of now to send 5,000 more.

And yet it is a marketing opportunity. “An oil spill is exactly the situation where Dawn is able to help and exactly what we want communicated about the product: tough on grease, yet gentle,” Ms. Baba said.

But, she says, the company has not put out any press releases, or made any commercials specific to the gulf disaster. She says the brand has not even decided if it will extend its current campaign past the end of June, when it was scheduled to end.

Still, some suspect the company’s motives. The comedian Stephen Colbert ran a segment on his Comedy Central show hypothesizing that Dawn was the real villain behind the oil spill.

“They made that commercial last summer and now there is an oil spill, how convenient,” he told viewers, eyebrow arched, earlier this month.

But Dawn does have its fans in the scientific community, including the International Bird Rescue Research Center.

The center was founded after two oil tankers collided in San Francisco Bay in 1971 and 7,000 birds were covered in oil. Volunteers tried cleaning them with a combination of mineral oil and corn meal. All but 300 birds died.

Over the years, founders of the organization looked for a better solution. They tested nail-polish removers, paint solvents and other compounds before settling on Dawn in 1978 as the best product for the job.

While other dish detergents were good, Dawn had the right ratio of “surfactants” — cleaners that cut oil — to be effective yet not irritate the birds and other animals like otters and seals.

Organizers also liked that it was readily available at any store and that it did not hurt animals’ ability to whisk away water.

Procter & Gamble refused requests by the research center to donate its product until 1989. In recent years, Dawn has started raising money for the center and also the Marine Mammal Center. In its current campaign, the company is raising money from sales of the product, and is on track for \$500,000 by the end of the month, Ms. Baba said.

But even as the money pours in for the bird cleaners, new doubts are being raised about whether cleaning them really makes sense over the long run.

As of last week, nearly 30 birds a day were arriving at the research center’s rehabilitation facility in Fort Jackson, La. The oil covering them is so thick that it

first is rubbed with a chemical pretreatment.

They are then cleaned up to three at a time in a row of sinks in an open warehouse, where Dawn is put right on the birds and rubbed into their feathers. (Currently the oil is so heavy that research center staff members say they are using one bottle of Dawn for each bucket of water and three buckets to wash one pelican.)

The birds emerge from the baths still subdued, but looking a lot more like themselves. After they are blow-dried they sit in outdoor cages, waiting to fully recover and be sent to gulf beaches not yet covered in oil.

Yet even Jay Holcomb, the executive director of the bird rescue research center, acknowledged that it was unclear what happens after that.

“It is like a Band-Aid to a gunshot wound to the heart,” said Mr. Holcomb, who says it is impossible to estimate how many of the birds will survive when returned to the wild.

Jordan Flaherty contributed reporting from Fort Jackson, La.

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