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Absolut Web Campaign Says Much About Brand, More About MediumBy [Christopher Saunders](#), ClickZ, Aug 6, 2001

An ad campaign designed not just to sell not just a product -- but the medium.

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It's an audacious undertaking for all but the most durable of brands. Which is why TBWA\Chiat\Day and longtime client Absolut Vodka are confident that a head-turning push to boost the distiller's brand online is also going to clear a few things up about online advertising.

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Counterintuitively, the much-awaited online campaign for Absolut -- its first Web branding push to date -- launched last week with that most inauspicious of online ad products: a single, static banner.

But the ad is more than it first seems. Instead, the creative -- which shows the very bottom of an Absolut bottle -- is as much about the product as it is a statement on online advertising's problems, specifically relating to the aging banner ad unit. The copy (which appears squeezed into the space)? "Absolut Limitation."

Of course, Absolut's marketing has always been more focused on fostering a worldly, savvy brand identity than straight product shilling. But until now, the trick has been translating that to the Web, according to the New York-based TBWA\Chiat\Day team.

"Everyone was always saying 'Why doesn't Absolut advertise online?'" said the agency's Neal Davies, who is account director for Absolut in North America. "So this is sort of our reason, and our way of making a wry comment on why."

"You try to squeeze [Absolut's brand identity] into a banner ad, and what you come out with is a comment on space that's available," he added.

But there's more to the story. The TBWA team followed up the initial banner flight with a set of three rich media executions, "Absolut Spectrum," "Absolut Au Naturel" and "Absolut Investigation," which bring bigger-than-banner units and Flash-based interactivity to the mix.

But while encouraging users to play with an animated ad is one thing, Davies said the team was shooting for something altogether larger with the effort.

"One of the ideas is certainly to get people talking about online advertising," Davies said. "In a lot of ways, online advertising is being given such a hammering. We wanted to say online advertising can be limiting, if you choose to be limited ... Instead, we said, 'watch this space.'"

"We started the campaign on what had gone before, and commenting that what we intend to do with online advertising is slightly limited by the kind of stuff people attempted in the past -- we want to move on to a better environment," he said.

Added Mikael Marticki, TBWA's interactive strategist on the account, "'Absolut Limitations' kind of pointed out problems with online ads now. But we also provide an implicit solution to the problem -- creativity. And the second phase is the peak of that."

"We wanted it to stand out in sea of online clutter," Marticki added. "We wanted to be a guiding light."

In "Au Naturel," a viewer can use a peeler to "peel away" orange skin in the shape of an Absolut bottle, revealing Absolut Mandarin. "Spectrum" uses a dynamic color "slider" -- such as one would find in Photoshop or in their monitor Preferences -- to allow users to scroll through the various flavors and colors of Absolut. "Investigation," which is essentially an interactive remake of 1985 print execution "Absolut Clarity," uses a magnifying glass to zoom in on an Absolut bottle.

"'Spectrum' and 'Investigation' are two very different ads, in the sense that one is an entirely new idea," Davies said. 'Spectrum' uses technology to talk to consumers in very easily understandable way about the range of flavors. Whereas 'Absolut Clarity' was a great ad 10 years ago, with 'Investigation' we can now move over the bottle, and that's a great thing in its own right."

Added Marticki, "We kind of offered them new opportunities to experience new Absolut, at the same time delivering something consistent with the brand image."

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The initial banner ran on Web advertising and dot-com business trades. The buy for rich media ads extended to portals (Yahoo), niche sites (Maxim, Gay.com, Net Noir) and entertainment sites (Shockwave.com, AtomFilms.com, E! Online). The ads will run through the end of the year, potentially with new rich media ads being switched in.

In addition to the online media buys, the agency also is aiming to translate Absolut's brand essence to wireless, with a specialized campaign on wireless city guide Vindigo.

To date, Alley-based Vindigo's ads have consisted of one or two lines at the bottom of a screen. But the Absolut campaign integrates animation -- an Absolut bottle slides up onto the screen -- and style, with "conversation starters" targeted to the Vindigo areas that the user is examining.

For instance, searching for Japanese restaurants might see the copy: "In Japan, a black cat crossing your path is good luck." After a moment, the graphic displays the kicker: "Absolut Insight."

"It's not obtrusive," Davies said. "You only see half the bottle in the animation, and it's a familiar piece of branding. What we're not doing is interrupting people's user experience -- hopefully, we're contributing to it. People will use Vindigo to choose a bar or restaurant, but the ad gives people something to talk about once they're there."

As a third portion of the campaign, online-only commercials -- to date used only in a limited viral marketing campaign -- will start appearing before streamed content.

Beyond Absolut's intended message about the usefulness of online advertising, the decision to move a portion of its branding work online also suggests good things for the industry.

"The opportunity is now there to utilize new technology trends worthy of name Absolut," Davies said. "People already have their minds made up about what Absolut is. Now, we feel that the technology is beginning to allow us to bring the bottle to life online. It's one of the reasons we didn't rush out in the past."

"The offline campaign has a degree of interaction, anyway," said Davies, who cited the frequent letters and submissions from fans of the company's print campaign. "People collect the ads, and even the promotional things we make for the ads. There is a level of interactivity that people have with the brand ... and we were waiting for the technology to be at a point to meet those expectations."

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