Animation and Advertising
by John Straiton

With the introduction of a promotional and publicity film category as part of the 76 competition, Canadian animator John Straiton was asked to "comment on the use of animation in this field, as applied to North American, and his own, experience." Originally published in the "Personal Viewpoints and Experience" section of the Ottawa 76 festival program.

This year the OIAF honors Straiton’s extensive experience with an 60 min. retrospective of his work. Included in the program include his award winning short films “Portrait of Lydia”, “Animals in Motion” and “Horseplay”. John will be in attendance to answer all your questions.

As far as I know, Procter & Gamble has used animation in a television commercial only once.

The reason Procter & Gamble does not use animation in commercials is, I believe, that their research demonstrates, again and again, that animation is not as persuasive in soap and cake and shortening commercials as live action. I once sat with a group of women watching a test commercial for Campbell’s Chicken Noodle Soup. It had a cartoon chicken being rejected by the flock because it wasn’t acceptable for Campbell’s. The women loved the commercial. "I’d call the kids to see that commercial. It’s so funny," The interviewer asked if it would make them buy soup. "Oh no. That’s just entertaining." The commercial that was persuasive showed appetising close-ups of the soup, pieces of chicken meat and the big, fat noodles.

There are exceptions. The Pillsbury doughboy is a good visual signature. An herbal shampoo uses lovely fantasy animation. The Green Giant characters have survived for some years - combined with live photography. An early use of animation was the elves who whisked the dirt right down the drain for Ajax, the foaming cleanser. And children’s advertising has used animation for generations - by such sophisticates as Kellogg’s, General Foods, General Mills. Tony the Tiger is Great.

The one animated commercial that I know of for Procter & Gamble was one I wrote - myself for Cheer detergent.

Several years ago, soap companies began putting towels, washcloths and such in their packages to make their products more attractive. Eventually, Procter & Gamble decided its top quality brands should be sold as products that were effective cleansers rather than carriers of consumer bribes.

So I decided to ridicule people who bought the brands containing premiums - and did so by showing a foolish husband who thought he could furnish the house with "free" items from detergent packages. To soften the ridiculing, I decided to use animation - not caricature or cartoony - but rather, a realistic style like a New Yorker cartoon. The commercial worked. But I have not known P&G to use animation since.

For a beer product (beer is a blend of ale and lager) I used animation to show the two brews being blended into one. For a number of reasons, the main one being a gustatory schizophrenia, the advertising was not notably successful.

An irony of advertising is that few people know what really works. "Cartoons" have been used for generations because conventional wisdom says children like cartoons (ignoring the vast adult audience in the past for "the funnies" and for Walt Disney’s output). The question is, has everyone in the cereal business been competing within a conventional wisdom, like a lot of Victorian house designers? Or have they tried many techniques and found animated cartoons the best?

Perhaps there are some answers suggested by new comers to children’s advertising - the family eat-away-from-home chains. Ronald Macdonald and his fantastic friends, and the Great Root Bear, are live photography of cartoon characters.

Some Canadian regulations rule against animated advertising to children on the unproven assumption that comical drawings overly influence children. Perhaps it is this ruling that has forced advertisers into "live" techniques which may very well be more persuasive than the cartoons they displace. Animators should urge research to test whether cartoons might be less persuasive to children, thus encouraging the use of animation in children’s advertising and subsidising an art form that may otherwise be extinguished in Canada.

The most misguided users of "cartoon" animation in Canada are many departments of the Government. These people are terrified of using any of the tried and true methods of the cruel and efficient commercial world. To avoid any appearance of hard sell they use animation to deal with such serious matters as the Census, filling in tax
forms, etc.
Not only does this make the Canadian Government look as childish as Fruit Loops, it makes its advertising look more advertising.)
You may wonder at me, an obsessed animator, finding little to say for animation in advertising.

The Procter & Gamble syndrome of reaction against animation in advertising is probably a mis-reading of a more basic finding of consumer research: humour rarely works in advertising. (This is an endless debate itself. I've seen humour fail often enough to be very wary of its use in advertising.) Animation is used most frequently for humour. So, by an accident of association, animation is branded as unsuccessful in advertising.

There are some examples of non-humourous animation that may be working. One I admire is the fantasy pool commercial for somebody's Herbal Essence Shampoo. The Rain Tire used animation to illustrate abstract sensations. 7-Up has tried for a psychydelic mood with Yellow Submarine-type animation. Who will ever forget the little animated A's and B's in the Bufferin commercial?

There should be many cases where animation will accomplish things better or cheaper than live photography.

1) Show how a mechanical device works: like (a) the Honda Civic 's new kind of combustion system, (b) the structure of a fire, (c) the action of a jet-spray tooth cleaner, (a) a self-cleaning oven.
2) Show the anatomy of a product: (a) the assembly of a chocolate bar, (b) the ingredients in a can of soup, (c) the action of a fertilizer, (d) the vegetable juices in a vegetable drink.
3) Show abstract ideas: (a) the Green Giant symbol of fertility, (b) detergency, (c) protection.
4) Show how a product works: (a) a razor blade cutting close, (b) drain cleaner, (c) lawn mower, (d) tire tread, (e) reflex camera, (f) fluoride in toothpaste, (g) microwave oven.
5) Show things too big or too small to photograph: (a) animated maps, (b) action of nerve vapour on flies, (c) action of a dog's flea collar.

more instances where animation can be useful in advertising. Militant consumers want to know more about products and how they work. Animation will often be able to help in explaining products factually and seriously.

For the Office of Energy Conservation (Energy, Mines & Resources), I conceived some messages - the word "commercial" sticks in government throat - to persuade Canadians that each individual's efforts count toward the total result. A perfectly obvious idea was to show the cumulative effect resulting from every Canadian turning down his/her thermostat. The resulting annual saving would be 12,000,000 barrels of oil. I was mulling over miniature models, optical tricks and such when Wolf Koenig of the National Film Board suggested animation.

He showed me an astonishing film of a moon-landing rendered by Sid Goldsmith. I was sold. The "commercial" was made. Several million Canadians have seen that message at least once. People remember it and recite the figures back to us. I was most pleased, perhaps, when my wife asked me "How did they photograph all those barrels?"

Another commercial made for us by NFB was "City Lights". Again, I have been asked how we managed to get building managers to turn off the lights for us. Although we are using animation, the results are credible. When animation is used believably in advertising, in communication, it can be very effective and persuasive.

In the case of Energy Conservation, animation proved fast and economical. And there were no hassles with temperamental directors, recalcitrant cameramen, work-to-rule crews, eclectic editors and so on. Just a nice friendly discussion or two, a look at some working drawings and it's done.

Surely, the people who will influence and benefit most from energy conservation are the little kids in front of their TV sets today. How about showing how we can live happily in a less consumptive life-style without fossil fuels? The thought suggests itself - why not a Canadian Shangri-la in the Rockies - cut off from the rest of Canada for 100 years without coal or oil? We could visualise a society using solar energy, wind, water, wood, heatpumps, perhaps some form of nuclear power. Science fiction with a message. What a subject for animation! And what fun.