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Stuart Elliott's In Advertising

A New Irish Vodka Offers Wisdom, With a Wink and a Smile

Could there possibly be any room in the overcrowded vodka market for another brand? Well, as the Irish might say, "There's little value in the single cow."

The Irish perspective is relevant here because the new vodka, the subject of an estimated \$2 million campaign now under way, is imported from Ireland. The vodka is named Boru, after Brian Boru, the high king of Ireland whose harp has come to symbolize the country (and appears on the labels of a competitive beverage, Guinness stout).

Boru will battle against vodka brands like Absolut and Finlandia, priced at around \$18 for a 750-milliliter bottle. That is one rung on the vodka ladder below the highest-priced brands like Grey Goose and Ketel One. The Boru bottle has a narrow neck, possibly following the advice of an old Irish saying, "A narrow neck keeps the bottle from being emptied in one swig."

The campaign for Boru, by Fathom Communications in New York, seeks to carve out an identity for the brand in the fiercely competitive vodka category by giving it a personality reflective of its Irish heritage. The posters for Boru, as well as coasters, T-shirts and other promotional items, present the product as straightforward, honest and genuine, with a puckish sense of humor, as expressed in "Boru-isms" that offer words of Irish wisdom, with a wink and a smile, on myriad topics.

To link that image more directly to the brand, the campaign seeks to connect the tone of voice to the vodka's attributes of purity and clarity. In fact, "Clarity from Ireland" serves as the theme of the campaign.

"The Boru-isms form feelings for the brand like it was a person," says Mark Andrews, chairman and chief executive at Castle Brands in Rego Park, N.Y., which was formed in February by the merger of his Great Spirits Company, the American importer of Boru for three years, with the Roaring Water Bay Spirits Company in Dublin, Ireland, which makes Boru and other brands like Clontarf Irish Whiskey.

"With this idea, Boru's position is as a brand that speaks to people, a brand that has a point of view," he adds. "I was really intrigued by it."

"Fathom showed us a lot of vodka ads, and a lot of them were way out there," Mr. Andrews recalls. "They weren't straightforward; it was hard to identify with them."

"These ads were crisp and clear and direct and approachable," he adds. "And I very much like the scalability: They work on a coaster that costs a penny or on a building wrap that costs \$100,000."

Many of the ads offer catchy comments on modern life. For instance, there is "Boru on rush hour: Life is too short not to be in a hurry." And there is "Boru on cellphones: People who like to hear themselves talk rarely care how others hear them." There is also "Boru on civic improvement: The thing about cities is that they're never done."

Most of the "Boru-isms" are in the form of proverbs or truisms. There is one that is very Irish, "Boru to the man about town: May you die in bed at 95, shot by a jealous spouse." There is "Boru on enjoying life: It's better to spend money like there's no tomorrow than to spend tonight like there's no money." There is "Boru on patience: Don't get on the bus before it arrives and don't get off before it stops."

There is also "Boru on advice: Worse than the man who will take no advice is the man who takes it all." And there is "Boru on lovely women: Beauty may boil the blood but it won't boil the tea kettle." (Better keep that one from Maureen O'Hara, or she may deck the copywriter.)

"Some of the Boru-isms may offend people, and some people will say they're funny or clever," Mr. Andrews says. "Eventually, a brand personality will evolve."

One cheeky slogan on variety ("Too much of a good thing is a contradiction in terms") is used to promote a trio of stacked glass bottles, the Trinity Pack, which is composed of regular, citrus-flavored and orange-flavored vodkas. The Trinity Pack comes in 50-milliliter and 200-milliliter versions.

"You look at the competitive landscape and the advertising is very esoteric, putting the vodka up on a pedestal, as if it were a fashion brand," says Peter Groome, president at Fathom. "We thought we'd speak more directly, more relevantly, spread the word about Boru through the Boru-isms."

"The Irish are known for being direct, speaking their minds," he adds, "and people appreciate that honesty."

The Boru-isms are "almost unlimited," Mr. Groome says, "from the timeless to the very timely." As an example of the latter, he suggests one inspired by the bizarre fate after death of the baseball legend Ted Williams: "Freeze vodka, not All-Stars."

The Boru campaign began early this month in New York, on posters that appear in subways and buses as well as on telephone kiosks and construction sites as building wraps. There are also coasters distributed to bars where Boru is sold.

"Most of our competitors are in upscale magazines," Mr. Groome says. "We thought the opportunity to stand out was in out-of-home" media. The campaign is to be introduced next in Boston, in August and September, to be followed in 2005 by markets that include Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles and Miami.

As for the selection of the initial two markets for Boru, Mr. Groome explains simply, "New York and Boston have a lot of Irish-Americans."

They might then recognize another traditional Irish saying that could perhaps be reworked into a Boru-ism: "Drink is the curse of the land. It makes you fight with your neighbor. It makes you shoot at your landlord and it makes you miss him."