

September 28, 2006

‘Our commercial needed to be done’

Here’s what the guys from Dennis were thinking when they wrote that ad

By Sara Smith

Keith Dennis and Aaron Masterson have been working together in the car-selling business for 19 years. Dennis, the president of Dennis Automotive Holdings, plays the pensive straight man to the boisterous, bigger-than-life Masterson, the company’s VP and general manager.

It’s Dennis’s voice radio listeners frequently hear on commercials for Dennis Mitsubishi, one in a row of company dealerships on Morse Road. But when it came time to explain how they concocted the most talked-about local car commercial that never aired, Masterson took the lead.

“Keith writes everything, and I sit behind him and play the bass guitar, boom, boom, boom, and when he’s ready, he claps his hands and yells, ‘Water boy!’” Masterson said, shooting a smile at his buddy across the table.

“We basically sit in a room and throw stuff around until it sticks,” Dennis said, shaking his head.

“There’s a strange chemistry between the two of us,” Masterson said. “He’s an extremely articulate and straight individual, he’s got good values, and he’s anal. I possess none of those fine characteristics.”

It’s not too hard to guess whose sensibilities won earlier this month, when they wrote and recorded a commercial that landed Dennis in the center of an international media frenzy.

It started with a brief article in Saturday’s Columbus Dispatch, which reported that some local radio stations were refusing to air a jihad-themed commercial written and produced by the duo.

The ad declares jihad on the competition’s prices and boasts that one vehicle on the Dennis lot can comfortably seat up to 12 jihadists.

It also promises a rubber-sword giveaway on Fatwa Friday. By Monday, a story on the unaired ad had shipped on the AP wire and appeared in USA Today. Criticism came swiftly from American Muslims, who found it inappropriate and disrespectful of their religion and culture.

In Saturday’s Dispatch story, Masterson sounded resolute, despite the fact several radio stations had already refused to take his money.

“It starts next Friday morning,” he told the paper, later adding, “We made it very clear we wanted market saturation to get the point across.”

But in fact, by the time that story ran, Dennis was already having serious misgivings.



Over the weekend, Dennis and Masterson decided to kill the commercial. News of that decision appeared Tuesday, and it was greeted with a public expression of relief from Mitsubishi Motors North America, which said in a statement the ad “runs contrary to our company values.”

But the buzz lives on.

Masterson said interview requests are pending from Howard Stern, CNN and the Fox News show Hannity & Colmes.

“Some French TV show wanted to interview us,” he said.

By Wednesday, an in-box bulging with almost 20,000 e-mails—some with messages of hate, some supporting the ad—was still growing by the hour. Somewhere in a stack of messages was one from the Rev. Jerry Falwell. They don’t plan to return it.

Meanwhile, the infamous jihad commercial tape sat in a lockbox.

“We didn’t intend to harangue Islam or Muslims or Arabs. We don’t have a right to do that,” Masterson said. “But if we have people in this world who feel it’s their duty to harm men and women in uniform and our citizens, then we feel we have a right to make fun of them. That’s exactly the pretext behind this spot.”

Dennis said people are stressed out and worried, and they need the relief that laughter brings.

“The commercial was a joke,” he said.

But, in contrast to Masterson, Dennis was quick on Wednesday to declare that the joke went too far.

“The stations helped us confirm what we already thought,” Dennis said.

In fact, he said, the jihad commercial had already been shelved before the public learned it existed.

“The commercial was recorded on Tuesday (Sept. 19). Wednesday we were on the fence, and by Thursday we were like, ‘Nah, this isn’t gonna work,’” Dennis said. “Friday we were back in the studio recording another spot, and Saturday the Dispatch article came out.”

“Then all the fun started.”

Masterson said reaching the public through advertising is getting harder, and he believes in order for a commercial to be effective, companies have to address what’s on people’s minds.

“We don’t feel good about our troops in Iraq, our well-being, the price of oil,” he said. “These things are tied to terrorism. It needs to be talked about.”

“I can’t talk to you about it seriously. We’re damn car dealers. But we do have a right to joke about it. And when you hear the commercial, it really gets to you, and you don’t change the channel. You want to hear what we have to say, and that’s what we’re all about.”

He said humor breaks the ice and helps move serious dialogue forward. Furthermore, it moves cars, which is what the ad was supposed to do in the first place.

But now, he said, his company’s effort to sell Mitsubishis by joking about jihads has become something much bigger. Warming to the topic, he likened the ad to the American colonists speaking out against the British.

“We’ve struck a note,” Masterson said. “This is a watershed moment in America. What the pope said needed to be said because it’s in people’s minds. Our commercial needed to be done because things like this have a right to be said, and that’s what this is coming down to.”

“People feel like we’re being forced to be quiet, we’re being forced to not say what’s on our minds,” he said. “How is it some countries can do cartoons of Holocaust victims and we can’t make fun of terrorists? I think there’s a real divide with that.”

But, he said, “Maybe the market is not ready for this as much as we’d like them to be ready.”

He said he has a great deal of respect for the gay, Latino and black communities because they have the ability to laugh at themselves.

“They recognize the humor in their lifestyle,” he said. “Why can there not be humor in another lifestyle? Because it’s hiding behind the possibility of a religion.”

Fingering the 5-inch-thick stack of e-mail printouts on the table, Masterson said only 3 percent of them were negative.

“And of that 3 percent,” he said, “50 percent are not citizens of this country.”

“Careful, Aaron,” Dennis said quietly.

In the end, Masterson and Dennis said, they can’t afford to spend any more time mulling over the complexities of race relations or dealing with the hoopla surrounding the ad that never aired. They’re working to focus once again on what really matters.

“It all comes down to one simple thing,” Masterson said. “That’s selling cars.”

Despite reaction to the latest product of the pair’s creative chemistry, they said they have no plans to change their brainstorming process for future advertisements.

“We intend to go right back at the market the way we always have,” Masterson said, sitting up straighter. “We change nothing. To change would be phony.”

New ad spots for Dennis Mitsubishi have already wrapped production and are slated to run in the next 10 days. Meanwhile, Masterson said the infamous jihad commercial will remain in the lockbox.

“We gave the Muslim community our word that we wouldn’t air it,” he said. “And we’re the dealer you can trust.”