

Cult of the Cavemen

Joe Lawson needed a way to show that buying car insurance online was easy, so he reached deep into the primordial ooze and pulled out a pack of prehistoric pitchmen.



A caveman defends his hairy brethren on a mock cable news show in one of Lawson's GEICO.com television commercials.

Really, the Geico Cavemen just want to fit in. If you've passed a television lately, you've probably seen a dapper caveman scoffing on faux Fox News, catching a flight at LAX or resolving an existential meltdown (caveman's words, not mine) with a therapist.

Joe Lawson, an ad writer with the Richmond-based Martin Agency, created many of the insurance company's television spots including the reality-TV-mocking, "Tiny House." (The voice over: "The marriage was built to last but the house was built too small!" And my favorite line: "I just want to make an omelet.")

Lawson thought the initial cavemen spots were decent but that they would go extinct after the first run. That was back in 2004. Since early fall, the three articulate Neanderthals have been back on screen, expressing their displeasure with the derisive Geico ads and building the narrative towards a finale.

Lawson is energetic and looks younger than his 38 years but for a bit of gray sneaking into his manicured beard. He has a "Daily Show" sense of the times and finds celebrity culture endlessly amusing.

Some day he'd like to unfetter his creativity from having to sell a product, but the products he produces are some of the precious few that warrant laughter.

"For the caveman assignment, we wanted to let people know that Geico.com is easy," Lawson said. "Back in 2004, Noel Ritter (art director at the time) and I were reading George Saunders' 'Pastoralia.' It's about people who dress up as Neanderthals and act out Neanderthalism at a theme park."

"Noel just blurted out, 'So easy, a caveman could do it.'"

That was simple enough, but Lawson knew it had to be fresh. "Having a caveman in a pelt at a computer giving thumbs up wouldn't be a good idea. So we thought, what happens if cavemen did exist, and what if they were offended when they saw the Geico ads?"

Will Speck co-directed the ads with Josh Gordon. The twosome is putting the finishing touches on their first feature film, "Blades of Glory," which stars Will Ferrell and Jon Heder ("Napoleon Dynamite") as male

figure skaters. always felt, is the humanity, the relate-ability," Speck said. "Everybody's been in an airport, been exhausted, and had to look at a ticket. It's those little moments. I see myself making them."

Lawson smiles when asked about the airport spot.

"We obsessed over that tennis racket. We all knew that it had to be 1986 Donnay Bjorn Borg racket. There wasn't even a conversation."

"I've always said, they're not stuck in the Stone Age, they're stuck in 1986."

Speck said he tried to minimize clutter so the actors could improvise body language and dialogue. "It's all a rhythm thing. The joke has to be at the right point, not too crowded and without distractions," Speck said.

Indeed, many of the best lines are all off the cuff, like, "I'll have the roasted duck with the mango Salsa."

"It was either that or, 'Do you still have those little pizzas,'" Lawson said with a laugh. "I really loved that one, too."

John Lehr, who currently stars on the TBS show, "10 Items or Less," plays one caveman in therapy. He asks his therapist (played by Talia Shire, who you may know as Rocky's wife, Adrian), "What if it said, so easy a therapist could do it?" In a 15-second spot soon to be aired, Lehr role-plays with a doll at Shire's request.

Lawson said he's not sure where the idea for therapy came from. "I'm not in therapy," he said. "You try to put yourself in the character's mind. What are the personal repercussions of the ad campaign, using real life as our guide and PC-ness as a guide."

The final 30-second ad, which will air in the next few months, concludes the caveman narrative. The three Neanderthals are talking on the balcony at a chic Sunset Boulevard party. All is not well.

"There's a traitor in our midst," Lawson said. "Suddenly, there's infighting within the ranks."

— Aaron Kremer

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