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> C O N T E N T S



PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE PUPPET RUBBERBAND MAN  
**DDB CHICAGO GETS BENT INTO CLAYMATION**

BY MARCUS ROBINSON

> In years past, when we closed our eyes and pondered holiday wish lists, visions of industrial-strength paper cutters and flexible plastic garbage cans likely weren't warming the cockles of our hearts. But it's safe to say a few highlighters might have found their way into stockings this yuletide season because of one dude on the tube with a 90-degree part in the fro.

After two spots featuring the now-iconic Rubberband Man kicked off DDB Chicago's What's Your Thing? campaign for OfficeMax and resurrected the Spinners' tune for one generation and introduced it to another, that hep office cat who satisfies everyone's office or back-to-school supply needs hits the snow for a third spin at the rubberband ball.

This time he kicks it in a way that's usually reserved for cultural icons like Rudolph and The Little Drummer Boy. The RB Man has gone claymation, extending his cult status in Rankin/Bass style for a spot called "Santa's Helper," where he offers up necessities like a surge protector for a house full of Christmas lights, a step ladder for a short guy who wants to smooch under the mistletoe with a tall girl, and a Blackberry for Santa.

Appropriately, the stop-motion gurus at Portland's Bent Image Lab were given the task of translating the RB Man into a puppet version. Described by EP Ray DiCarlo as "artists trying to do business and not businessmen trying to do art," they'd gotten DDB's attention through a hilarious 2002 spoof they'd done in the '50s style for Saturday Night Live, called *The Narrator That Ruined Christmas*.

Bent director Chel White says the key to making the spot work involved matching the vintage look of those classic Christmas specials. To that end, they sought the grainiest film stock they could find and kept things as organic and handmade as possible. Their biggest challenge didn't turn out to be the look, but rather how to capture the dynamic personality of actor Eddie Steeples — who as a result of his RB Man persona was recently included in *People Magazine's* "Sexiest Men" issue — and inject it into the rigid stop-motion world.

In order to capture Steeples' unique mannerisms, Bent had him come out to Portland for a day so they could videotape him. Animators then used the footage as a guide for the puppet's movements and body. "It was an interesting design challenge because he has such a distinct physiognomy," says DDB art director Paul Harrod. "But if you're going towards this retro style of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and things like that, it's

(A-C) From desk chairs to step stools and chains to make the snow monster cool, OfficeMax's Rubberband man has it all.

very stripped down. The characters are virtually featureless. Their heads are usually just round wooden balls." Bent had to sculpt a dozen before they got one they liked. They were also careful to build in some of the idiosyncracies of the original animators and their frame-by-frame stop-motion methods. "They would accidentally touch a cloth shirt," notes DiCarlo, "but they couldn't tell that it moved when they took the next frame. So the clothing would crawl a little bit."

The entire labor-intensive process took eight weeks, with five solid weeks of stop-motion animation.

The result is remarkably true to the spirit and feel of the other spots, which is testament both the skills of the animators — down to how they finished, dressed and performed the character — and the durability of the idea. "It's not about any one product," says DiCarlo. "It's more about atmosphere and what's happening, and that you're improving situations that you're in."

The campaign's success — including the cult of Steeples — is somewhat unexpected given that group creative director Don Pogany had anticipated that the RB Man would be "more or less a lead blocker" for unrelated commercials to follow. But it's somewhat fitting considering he'd found inspiration close at hand. Pogany modeled the main character after a few people at the agency who delivered supplies on carts all tricked out with "little bizarre photographs or things that definitely reflect their personalities so they're not anonymous going through [the office]."

RB's trademark ball of rubberbands that opens every spot even has a direct link to the Spinners song, which is actually about a guy

who makes music with a rubber band between his toes. "It became a hood ornament for his cart," says Pogany. And the side view mirrors came from the director of the first two spots, David Kellogg, who took his queue from the hyper-accessorized scooters of Mod culture.

"It's one of those weird times when certain

things converge nicely," reflects Pogany. "I think the music has a place in a bunch of peoples' hearts. And if they like the song it instantly creates a mood. Eddie's acting ability brings it to another level. But I think through the idea and executions of Rubberband Man, somehow each person sees a little bit of himself or herself in the commercial."

Errol Morris once remarked to me that he saw the concept of the brand as "a quasi-religious thing"; that when you do it right you capture something intangible. Very few brands have achieved that rarified air, and only time will tell if OfficeMax has, but for the moment we can agree that in some small way RB Man makes the mundane office landscape funky for all of us. And like Santa Claus, he knows what your thing is. ◉

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- Rubberband Man> [www.rubberbandman.officemax.com](http://www.rubberbandman.officemax.com)