

FP MARKETING



PHOTO COURTESY OF BELL CANADA

Bell Canada countered Rogers' home-phone challenge with an image of an extended couch, trumpeting the price advantage of Bell TV.

DUELLING COUCHES

BY HOLLIE SHAW

Bell has aimed its sights at red, in the realm of politics and in marketing, since long before Pepsi took a swipe at Coca-Cola in the 1970s with the Pepsi Challenge.

But in the annals of corporate mudslinging, it's not clear who will emerge victorious in the latest Bell-versus-Rogers advertising battle — although it's likely Bell will have spent a lot less money on its efforts.

Last month, **Rogers Communications Inc.** debuted an ad campaign for its home phone service encouraging consumers to take the "Rogers home phone challenge," illustrating the Rogers-versus-Bell argument with the aid of a bicoloured couch, one half red (signifying Rogers), the other half in **Bell Canada's** signature sea-blue hue. Television ads showed people testing out a cordless phone on both sides of the couch and declaring the quality of the reception the same. Outdoor billboard art showed the divided couch with the tag line, "The only difference? The price."

While the telecommunications rivals have been loath to ever name each other directly, from the sounds of it, the sight of Bell blue in Rogers ads proclaiming equality and price victory in their once-hallowed home land-line segment made Bell executives see red.

Within a week, Bell fired back with an ad featuring a couch that looks all but identical, disputing the price point with the tag line "Get more than Rogers for less than Rogers," and visually emphasizing the image by dramatically extending Bell's blue section of the couch.

"We don't normally name our competitors as part of our approach, [but] when they started the debate, we decided to embrace the tactic and have a bit of fun with them and sort of do a jujitsu move on them," said Rick Seifeddine, senior vice-president of brand at Bell Canada. "They put the couch down and we sat right on it," he chuckled. "When our executives are in that mood, decisions happen in a calibrated way, very quickly."

While marketing nabobs can debate the merits of negative

Bell responds to Rogers' home-phone challenge, but observers are skeptical that anyone wins through negative advertising

advertising practices, the duelling couch campaigns have led to the bewilderment of some consumers, many of whom do not know which campaign came first; others, thinking the ads came from a single company, were befuddled about when the corporate messaging seemed to change around the same image.

"The problem I see with this kind of advertising is it simply confuses the consumer to the point no one wins," wrote Cameron, an online commentator at the forum digitalhome.ca. "The point gets lost in the similarities."

While stymieing its rival's negative ad campaign might have been precisely Bell's point, in the end the exercise is not likely to win Bell many favours with consumers, said marketing consultant Lyle Goodis of

Toronto-based Lyle Goodis and Associates.

"I don't think you can ever convince someone through negative advertising," he said. "There are so many other creative opportunities to explain to someone why you are better than a competitor. One competitor could blow the other out of the water by offering customer service that was clearly superior to the other and market that. Customer satisfaction will help the business in the shorter term and the longer term in terms of earnings and market share."

Mr. Seifeddine countered that the campaign was not supposed to look or sound original.

"It is a reaction," he said. "This was about function more than form. We have had our moments of form, but this was a

moment of smacking that tennis ball back at them."

The red couch/blue couch concept, conceived by Rogers' agency of record Publicis of Toronto, was intended to open customers up to the idea of comparison shopping, said Phil Hartling, vice-president of consumer services at Rogers cable.

"Our intention in the advertising is to make it clear that customers have a choice," he said. The TV ads also emphasize that there is no qualitative difference between Rogers' home phone service, which launched in 2005, and Bell's home phone service.

When asked about Bell's swift retort, Mr. Hartling said, "I will never comment on somebody else's advertising ... but I will say that you don't have to imitate if you have the best product."

He also suggested the couch is not a particularly important part of Rogers' overall branding arsenal.

"Campaigns come and go," he said. "[The couch] is certainly generating conversation but you have to recognize that there are a whole variety of ways that we talk to customers." Typically Rogers runs campaigns for five to six weeks, he said, and then moves on to something new.

"We are working on the next phase now," he said, without confirming whether a couch of any colour would be present in the new executions.

Bell's rebuke is typical of the new, more proactive marketing era at Bell, said David Moore, president of the advertising agency Leo Burnett in Toronto, one of four agencies used by Bell in a new collaborative agency model.

"I think it's reflective of a more competitive and nimble culture at Bell that is willing to react quickly to market conditions when they might not have in the past," he said. Wade Oosterman, chief brand officer, who worked with Mr. Seifeddine and George Cope, Bell chief executive, until the three departed for Bell in 2005, has been credited with a bolder approach, pulling the animated Bell beaver campaign and focusing his efforts on streamlining the marketing focus to the conglomerate's core businesses.

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hshaw@nationalpost.com

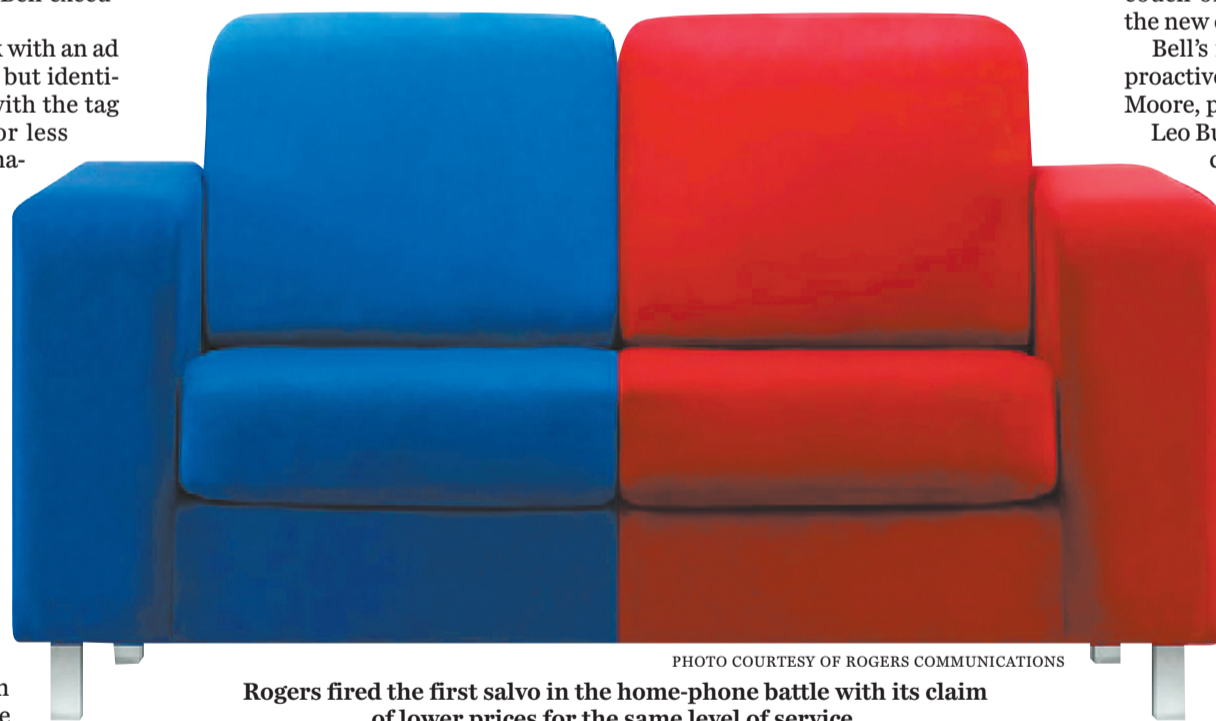


PHOTO COURTESY OF ROGERS COMMUNICATIONS

Rogers fired the first salvo in the home-phone battle with its claim of lower prices for the same level of service.



AD MISSIONS

Steam Whistle campaign seems to be an acquired taste

While summer beer ads are in heavy rotation, this execution for Steam Whistle Brewing by Toronto-based advertising agency Sharpe Blackmore Euro RSCG does not call upon the standard tropes of loud rock music and buxom girls in bikinis. The Ad Missions panel weighs in.



■ **Andrew Potter** is a *Maclean's* columnist, an editor at *The Ottawa Citizen* and co-author of *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*.

Steam Whistle never really grabbed me as either a beer or a brand. You can sort of see what they are aiming for — the industrial authenticity that appeals to the sorts of guys who get off on the thought that their condo building used to be a shoe factory — but the brew itself is too bland, and the messaging too diffuse, to give it a strong identity. Take a look at the company's website and you'll see what I mean: a skateboard design contest, a promo for environmental initiatives and a jazzy-looking music series. This ad only adds to the confusion. The sounds of the steam whistle is supposed to represent the end of the blue-collar workday, not a frigging steam train. All aboard the ad campaign to nowhere.

■ **Scott Reid** is a partner and creative director at Philter Communications Inc.

Beer commercials are an interesting bunch. Some impact culture and yet don't increase sales (think "Wazzzzzzup"). Others focus on inane drivel about cold being a taste. And others are fantastically entertaining (check out Bud Light's back catalogue). Steam Whistle has done itself a tremendous favour by not taking up these memes. No grandiose statements about its recipe, no dance-club scenes with clever pickup artists, and no scientific inventions of questionable merit (vented wide mouth cans????!!). Instead, they've used a simple device: the opening of bottles sped up to sound like a train. This is great brand-building that cuts through the clutter. And the icing on the cake? Watch what happens to the condensation on the bottle when the whistle blows. Nice touch.

■ **Andris Pone** is a Toronto-based brand strategy consultant

Full disclosure: Steam Whistle is my favourite beer. I've fully bought in to its premium/craft/heritage brand position, embodied in the historic Steam Whistle Roundhouse, in which every bottle is brewed. So this ad resonates with me. I recognize that the centrality of the bottle opener reinforces the brand position, because I know that Steam Whistle uses bottles that are not twist-off: because management believes twist-off caps are detrimental to product freshness and ergo, unworthy of lovingly-made brew. Non-customers will miss this vital association and be left watching a bunch of beer bottles being opened, not an enormous step up from watching paint dry. And so the ad succeeds if it's intended only to strengthen bonds with existing customers — and not to acquire new ones. *Financial Post*