

THE AD GAME'S BUSTER KEATON



■ For most people most of the time, the price of free TV consists of suffering through the commercials. But in between the hard-sell pitches for denture adhesives and the soggy sagas of overworked moms with dirty laundry, there comes now and then an ad directed by a man named Joe Sedelmaier. His commercials make people laugh out loud. They are far funnier than most of the network programs they blissfully punctuate. They helped start a recent trend toward humorous commercials, not all of them as successful as Sedelmaier's.

Sedelmaier is best known for the Federal Express commercials, which he directed for six years. A famous one stars the fast-talking man above. According to audience sampling by a firm called Video Storyboard Tests, the splenetic executive was one of last year's most memorable and effective characters. Sedelmaier also directs the TV ads for Mr. Coffee, Dunkin' Donuts, and Aamco Transmissions, among others, and in a few weeks a new series of ads he recently shot for Wendy's restaurants goes on the air. In income and influence, he's near the top of his specialized profession. Echoing the sentiments of many on Madison Avenue, Howard Rieger, a senior vice president of the NW Ayer ad agency, says bluntly: "He's the best."

Unlike most of his counterparts, Sedelmaier lives not in New York but in Chicago, where he has a studio and offices in a drab

three-story brick building off Michigan Avenue that housed, decades ago, the Chez Paree nightclub. In conversation he's extraordinarily entertaining, adept at cruelly accurate imitations—an auditioning actor, an insipid commercial. He grew up in Orrville, Ohio, attended the Art Institute of Chicago, then became an art director at the Young & Rubicam and J. Walter Thompson ad agencies. He went into business as a filmmaker 14 years ago.

Sedelmaier didn't invent funny commercials, and he isn't the sole force behind their resurgence in recent years. Polaroid's bickering couple and Miller Lite's quarreling jocks are also established hits. But Sedelmaier's ads have an unmistakable style. Professionals describe them as spare and symmetrical, which means that the camera generally squares off on the subject and stays put. Sedelmaier's real signature, however, dates back to Buster Keaton. His characters keep a straight face while their lives shatter around them. A good example is the

On location in Los Angeles, Joe Sedelmaier, 49, directs an ad for Wendy's restaurants.



In the script of this ad for *Independent Life of Jacksonville*, the husband floated heavenward. But as directed by Sedelmaier, a lightning bolt vaporizes the fellow down to his sneakers.

Federal Express ad in which the chairman of the board assures a meeting of big shots that all is well because Bingham here has sent their extremely important bid via Federal Express. Cut to Bingham, who has clearly done no such thing. Instead of quaking or hiding under the table, Bingham just stares blankly—and hilariously—as his life passes before his eyes. “If you play it deadpan,” Sedelmaier insists, “people *will* catch it.”

Just as important, Sedelmaier’s characters always convey the bite of reality, even if they’re impossibly exaggerated. In a commercial he directed for Pacific Southwest Airlines, a harried business traveler asks a reservations clerk at another airline when the next plane for Phoenix leaves. “Do you like duck?” asks the clerk. He is the most unctuous character since Uriah Heep, but there’s the ring of truth as he keeps evading the exasperated traveler’s question and promises him “the widest body seating availability available.”

SO DISTINCTIVE—and effective—is Sedelmaier’s touch that he has achieved power practically unheard of in his business. He won’t touch a commercial if he doesn’t like the idea. He also insists on a free hand in improving the “storyboard,” as the shooting script is called. In that Federal Express fast-talking-man ad, Sedelmaier cut three scenes, rearranged the rest, and rewrote most of the lines.

He casts the commercials himself but uses actors only half the time (the fast talker was one), explaining that they often fall into stock facial expressions that no one uses in real life. Over the years he has taken Polaroid snapshots of hundreds of intriguing faces; most people have some ham at heart and are glad to turn up for a tryout when Sedelmaier calls. Among recent stars of Sedelmaier commercials have been an architect, a photo retoucher, and a plumbing inspector. He gets them to “act” simply by telling them to look up, or blink, or smile when he gives a signal.

In the studio Sedelmaier is his own lighting man—this in an industry that normally employs highly paid specialists to cast a rosy glow on a plate of lasagna—and his own cinematographer. Directors just don’t do those things, but Sedelmaier says, “That’s how I get my kicks.” He supervises his own film editing as well. He even directs the unseen announcer who commonly reads a phrase or slogan at the commercial’s end. He keeps the announcer ignorant of what’s going on in the ad—by tearing his lines off from the rest of the script—to prevent him from introducing the slightest suspicion of a chuckle. “He should just talk to me,” Sedelmaier explains.

It’s not surprising that a man with granite-like opinions is not always Mr. Congeniality while on the set. The same ad agency executives who call him “brilliant” and “a genius” allow that when it’s time to roll ’em he’s “crazy” and “totalitarian.” This costs him business. “People are afraid to use him because

they’ve heard about his attitude,” says one agency vice president who has worked with him. He adds, “If you want genius, well, you put up with it.”

IT APPEARS that Sedelmaier needn’t worry about business. His calendar is full and since he has his own production company, he makes a profit on producing as well as directing the ads. His directing fee of \$6,000 a day is among the highest in the industry (a typical commercial takes a day to set up and another day to shoot, after weeks of planning). Despite his simple style—no aerial shots or casts of thousands—his finickiness about detail pushes up production costs, so the finished ad often has a premium price. Many of Sedelmaier’s 30-second commercials cost \$80,000 to \$90,000, and one recently came in at \$191,000.

There’s one client he’ll have to do without: Federal Express. The ads that made Sedelmaier famous were conceived by a hot New York agency, Ally & Gargano. A year ago Sedelmaier had been hired to direct a feature film with comic Rodney Dangerfield (they broke up, says Sedelmaier, over disputes about who was in charge), so he couldn’t direct three new Federal Express ads. Pressed for time, Michael Tesch and Patrick Kelly, the agency team that had developed the campaign, played director themselves. Feelings were bruised on both sides, and Sedelmaier and the agency both state flatly that there will be no Federal in Sedelmaier’s future.

There is, however, another movie, this one to be produced with the Disney studio and emphatically without stars. There’s also a looming potential problem: Sedelmaier imitators. A number of directors now offer to “do Sedelmaier.” Jean-Claude Kaufmann, vice president in charge of TV production at the Dancer Fitzgerald Sample agency, thinks Sedelmaier should be worried. “The imitators may never have his talent,” he reasons, “but some clients may not care. They may be willing to go for a good imitation.”

Sedelmaier has seen the imitations and isn’t losing any sleep. “In some ways it’s like they’re playing with your children,” he explains, “but I really don’t care. If they could copy me well, it’d bother me. But they’re doing a takeoff on a takeoff. I’m doing a takeoff on reality.”

■ Hilariously effective ads can help turn a small company into a big one, as Sedelmaier proved with Federal Express. Yet there is nothing flatter than a joke that flops. As with such other impenetrable arts as auto repair and tax accounting, hire an expert and hope for the best. **E**