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Purity Vodka Banks on Some Comic Timing

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Advertising

By STUART ELLIOTT

A SMALL brand of Swedish vodka seeking to become better known is turning to an American comedian with a big following for an online video series that will use humor to get noticed and shared.

The vodka is Purity and the comedian is Joel McHale, familiar from his work on “The Soup” on the E! cable channel as well as the comedy series “Community,” which the Yahoo Screen streaming-video service agreed last week to pick up for at least one more round of 13 episodes after NBC canceled the show.

The fact that Mr. McHale’s videos for Purity will be online, on the brand’s YouTube channel, as “Community” moves to streaming video from television is a coincidence. He does, however, have extensive experience in online video, as evidenced by the clips he creates for “The Soup” that can be watched on their own YouTube channel. His most recent clip, uploaded last week, offers a wicked spoof of the Jerry Seinfeld web series “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee”; in Mr. McHale’s version, the stimulative substance sought by the comedians offers a kick more powerful — and illegal — than the buzz from caffeine.

The videos for Purity featuring Mr. McHale — there are to be three initially, under the umbrella title of “Crafted Spirits,” with a possibility of

more next year — also serve as a showcase for his sardonic style of humor. For example, in the first video, scheduled to appear on Thursday, he tries to swipe an expensive car from a company he is visiting, which customizes vintage vehicles; complains about how his 6-year-old child choked “in the biggest game of the season;” takes a shot at NBC for not renewing “Community;” mocks the conventions of creating videos for brands; and uses as an exclamation “Holy (the vulgarity of all vulgarities, which is being bleeped).”

In a phone interview, Mr. McHale shifted in and out of his performance persona, which he has also displayed in campaigns for Ford, Klondike ice cream and Nintendo. Asked why he wanted to make the videos, Mr. McHale at first replied: “I like selling stuff. Money, my friend, I love the money.” Later, he offered this reason: “My approach is, if I like the product, why not make it interesting, why not make it funny? Instead of the 99 percent of ads that say, ‘Please, dear God, buy this.’ No one cares or pays attention.”

Purity is joining a lengthy list of advertisers that are turning to comedians to be the stars of major campaigns, on the theory that humor helps ads stand out and encourages consumers to pass along content on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Other examples include Acura, with Mr. Seinfeld; the Honda Fit, with comedians who speak English (Nick Thune) and Spanish (Felipe Esparza); Old Navy, with Jimmy Kimmel and Amy Poehler; Saks Fifth Avenue, with five current and former cast members of “Saturday Night Live”; and even another vodka brand, Smirnoff, with Alison Brie and Adam Scott.

“If you want to get people to watch, it can’t smell like an ad; it has to be entertaining,” said Tom O’Keefe, chief executive of an agency in Chicago, O’Keefe Reinhard & Paul, that works on some campaigns with comedy writers from Second City. Mr. O’Keefe, whose agency is not involved in the Purity campaign, praises the virtues of improvisational comedy in particular, in providing “insight into, and understanding of, how to connect with an audience.”

Hiring Mr. McHale to bring the funny could also help Purity stand out in a cluttered category. Vodka is one of the most-advertised distilled spirits. In recent days, there have been new ads or campaigns from brands that include Belvedere, New Amsterdam, Pinnacle and Skyy.

Although “comedy is not traditionally associated with luxury brands,” said Andy Glaser, president and chief executive of Purity Vodka, whose product sells for about \$40 for each 750-milliliter bottle, “we want to get onto the lips of consumers and have them taste Purity for themselves.”

“As a small brand, we did not want to go down the traditional advertising route,” he added, so chose instead to “look at the digital space and create content that, we hope, is compelling and engaging.”

The web series is being created and produced by Mr. McHale; his longtime collaborators like Ari Costa, Joe Russo, Anthony Russo, Brad Stevens and Boyd Vico; and the IMG Consulting division of IMG Worldwide.

“A lot of vodkas get lost in a sea of sameness,” said Scott Corbus, creative director at IMG Consulting. “Purity is about a discerning discovery and we want it to stand out by being different,” he added, in the same way that “Joel has a certain sense of humor, a little quirky, that’s not for everybody.”

Mr. McHale, for his part, said he was pleased with how the initial video turned out, describing it this way: “It’s watchable. I didn’t want to stab my eyes out.” The second video is planned for around Labor Day and the third for around Halloween.

Purity Vodka is spending an estimated \$1.5 million on the campaign. According to Kantar Media, a division of WPP, the company spent \$1.1 million on ads last year in major media.