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Vladimir Beroev / For MT

An actor falling in an ad advocating seat belt use.

Campaign Tries to Scare Drivers to Safety

17 September 2008 By Anna Malpas / Staff Writer

A man says goodbye to his family in the morning and walks out of his apartment. But instead of leaving by the front door, he calmly steps onto the windowsill and plummets to his death from his high-rise block.

This is the latest ad in a shock campaign to convince the country's notoriously reckless drivers to buckle up and slow down.

Russia consistently has the highest road deaths rate in Europe, and more than 33,000 people were killed in road accidents last year, according to government statistics. President Dmitry Medvedev last year compared the human toll of car accidents to losses suffered in a "military campaign."

The ad with the falling family man is part of a campaign commissioned by the Interior Ministry's road safety department and funded by the Russian Union of Automobile Insurers.

The idea was to show that the impact of a car crash at 50 kilometers per hour is comparable to that of a fall from the fifth story of a building, said Natalya Agre, managing director of the Russian agency that made the ad, Yes Taste Win Now, part of Media Arts Group.

The ad, which was directed by Frenchman Erick Ifergan, is one of five commercials in a campaign that relies heavily on disturbing imagery and was launched Tuesday on cable television, Internet sites and in cinemas, Agre said.

Regular television networks, however, appeared too squeamish about airing the ads.

"The channels say they don't want to show it," Agre said. "We tried to talk to them, and they said, 'Please do mild things. Don't show blood.'"

Shock ads, after all, are still rare in Russia. Recent billboards funded by an insurance company showed a teddy bear wearing a seat belt.

"The style of the ads has caused a lot of discussion," said Vladimir Shevchenko, chief spokesman for the Interior Ministry's road safety department. "A person comes home from work and wants to relax, and suddenly a bucket of blood is poured on him. At this stage, maybe it's absolutely right. Time will tell."

One of Ifergan's ads shows children waiting at home as their parents die in a high-speed crash. The ad was shot using a stuntman who appears in the new James Bond film.

Another shows a small boy straying into the path of a truck while his mother looks around for him.

A third shows a man drinking at a party and then crashing his car. The camera cuts between his girlfriend's face and his bloody face against the cracked windshield.

"I'm very happy. It's one of the best campaigns that I have done in my life," Ifergan said by telephone from France.

The director thinks that the hard-hitting style of the Russian ads is justified. "By being mild or joking, you don't really affect people," he said. The violence "isn't gratuitous, it's really for a reason."

The ads "will definitely affect people," Ifergan said. "It's not only my responsibility. It's also the responsibility of the government to play the ads as much as they can."

The campaign follows three ads produced for the traffic police last year.

One of the ads, titled, "Lucky," shows a couple having fun together. "We always hurried to live," a woman's voice says, as the couple's car cuts through a red light, hits a truck and flips.

The ad then cuts to the woman's face. "You were lucky. You died immediately," she says, before the camera reveals that she is in a wheelchair.

The ad's director, Ben Hartenstein, has made road safety ads in Denmark, but he said the Russian ad was different

because of its storytelling approach.

"In Denmark, they are more into visualizing the moment of the crash, shocking [you] with the moment of the crash in super-super slow motion," Hartenstein said by telephone from Denmark. "You can more identify with the Russian one."

Another ad in the campaign encouraged people to buckle up. It showed a young girl alive in a child safety seat while the bloodstained bodies of her parents are slumped in the front.

Hartenstein also made a milder ad starring restaurant mogul Arkady Novikov. "My diners know something about wine," Novikov says in the ad. "But even one mouthful of alcohol can ruin your life."

Such an approach proved less effective, Agre said. "The more emotional you get, the more blood, the better it works."

The Moscow agency she heads, Yes Taste Win Now, conducted a six-week survey of thousands of people in five cities to determine the impact of the ads.

Everyone said they disliked the ad with the child safety seat, but they also said it changed their attitude, Agre said. "The results we're getting, people react only to the more emotional stuff," she said.

With 14,731 deaths from January through July, road deaths this year were actually down 11.5 percent, compared with the same period last year, according to Interior Ministry statistics.

Some officials have linked the drop to stiffened fines for traffic violations - including not wearing a seat belt - that came into effect on Jan. 1.

No one involved with the ad campaign would disclose the budget for the project, but it clearly has superior funding compared with state-funded efforts.

The Emergency Situations Ministry recently made a series of short films on road and fire safety that are being shown on plasma screens in minibuses.

Olga Belinskaya, a ministry spokeswoman, said the ads are "very low budget" and star nonprofessional actors.

But shock tactics may be catching on in the battle against dangerous driving.

Traffic police in Novosibirsk this month distributed leaflets designed as letters from children killed in road accidents, Interfax reported. The letters, which were delivered to residential mailboxes, included phrases such as "I died almost immediately."

There are also some grassroots initiatives. When popular radio host Gennady Bachinsky died in a car crash in January, the accident made front-page headlines and shocked many.

A foundation established by his widow pays for the treatment of crash victims and has initiated a road safety campaign.

In its first event earlier this month, volunteers handed out ribbons in Moscow and St. Petersburg with the slogan "Preserve your lifeline. Wear a seat belt."

Around 10,000 ribbons were given out, organizer Natalya Makarenko said.

Bachinsky was wearing a seat belt, but his car swerved into oncoming traffic and hit a minivan.

"It seemed absurd that an accident could happen to [Bachinsky]," Makarenko said, adding that he was a cautious driver. "For that reason, the foundation wants to remind people every day that it can happen to anyone."