

Peer Review



Power steering: Lojack owners tell their harrowing stories, but it's Kokotakis who steals the show.



Drivers' Education



RANDALL RINGER
Verse Group

While you'd hope that Grand Theft Auto would let would-be cons work out their aggressions on the screen instead of in real life, the truth is that nearly 1.2 million cars disappeared from U.S. streets in 2006. An opportunity for auto anti-theft brands? Sorta. Here's another factoid: car thefts are actually on the decline in this country. That reality left marketers at VIA Group, the Portland, Maine, shop behind the latest campaign for the Lojack vehicle-tracking device, with the difficult task of conjuring fear while also sending a message of empowerment. Did they pull it off? Randall Ringer, co-founder of narrative-branding firm Verse Group in New York and a veteran of BBDO and JWT, weighed in on a topic that, as it turned out, he knew about from personal experience.

THERE'S NO WORSE FEELING THAN walking along the street to the space where you'd parked your car and seeing . . . just the space.

I know this because it happened to me two years ago. It was Thanksgiving, and our plan was to drive down to Pennsylvania for dinner with the family—two adults, four children. I'd had to rent a minivan for that. So I left my apartment in Manhattan to pick up the rental, which had been parked on 82nd Street. Emphasis on *had*. The van, of course, was gone. Vanished with it were my reasons to be thankful.

I relate that anecdote for a reason. Had my story been featured in any of the five new commercials for Lojack, the ending would have been different. With his solemn face and secret-agent suit, Nick Kokotakis would have popped out from nowhere to intone that I was one of the lucky ones because I'd had the sense to choose Lojack. Too bad I didn't have Lojack.

It's also too bad Lojack didn't have *me*. With auto thefts down for four straight years now, it seems like Americans have lost much of the fear and urgency they used to feel about having their cars stolen. Ironically, much of their false security may be due to the increased use of embedded tracking devices like the kind Lojack sells. That could mean that Lojack is the victim of its own success but, at any rate, its new strategy is to reconnect with consumers by showing the human consequences of losing your wheels to a thief.

The heart of the new campaign from VIA Group

TO READ PAST PEER REVIEWS, VISIT
www.brandweek.com

"The casting of Kokotakis is simply inspired. He's over-the-top melodramatic."

of Portland, Maine, is a series of realistic TV ads in which people share their stories of theft—and how Lojack saved the day. To add to the realism, VIA cast models who do not look like models. There is a Zen koan hidden somewhere in that.

One spot begins inside a car with the driver talking to the camera about how his car was stolen in broad daylight. Out of the front passenger window we see a man standing in the street in his dark suit, white shirt and tie. "Luckily Jeff had Lojack" he utters, right on cue, in a film-noir cadence that's somehow both reassuring yet admonitory (Kokotakis appeared in an episode of *Mike Hammer, Private Eye* back in 1998, incidentally). The ad signs off with the tag, "Get it back with Lojack."

Another spot features Carmen, a no-nonsense fiftysomething who shakes her head disdainfully and tells the camera: "My sister had that star thing, my son-in-law heard an alarm. Both their cars were stolen. I knew I needed something better." And there's Nick again, this time standing on her street, telling us: "Luckily, Carmen had it. Lojack . . ."

The scenarios and characters in these ads vary, but the serious theme anchors all of them. These spots evoke those old American Express commercials where Karl Malden would step out of the shadows to inveigh against the vacationing couple reckless enough to carry cash instead of traveler's checks ("Don't let this happen to you . . .") The dif-

ference in Lojack's case is that we are applauded for our refusal to be victims.

But if the approach is derivative, the results still deliver. The stories in these spots are evocative without being overproduced. And the casting of Kokotakis is simply inspired. He's just so over-the-top melodramatic that the implied self-effacement of his performance resolves the dramatic tension. (At the very end of one spot, you actually see him buttoning his blazer and walking away.) There's something contagious about the way he says, "Lojack, the most successful theft recovery system on Earth."

If only Lojack's marketing were so easily brought off. Traditionally, Lojack ran radio spots in markets where the brand enjoyed strong sales, but increased competition has apparently, er, stolen some market share. Which means that the company has had to broaden its media approach considerably. These spots are running on national cable TV and Lojack has established a strong online presence, too, in the form of rich media banners and a microsite. The online campaign, however, lacks the dark and engaging edge of the TV spots.

The strongest of the lot are for motorcycles. In these, the tonality is just right, and the whole story is told in a pithy, hard-hitting phrase, such as: "Your bike's been ripped off. Your heart's been ripped out."

The weaker online creative falls into the trap of listing statistics, such as that a car is stolen in this country every 27 seconds. These stray from the strategy of emotional engagement. In fact, the whole campaign tends to overemphasize Lojack's market leadership without connecting that to something relevant. So here's a suggestion for Lojack: Take credit for the four straight years of dropping auto-theft rates.

By the way, like the Lojack stories, my Thanksgiving actually *did* end up with a happy ending. Turns out my rental van hadn't been stolen; the cops had towed it the night before. If only Nick Kokotakis had been around to wise me up.

BANNER AD



Take it away: Banner ads and a microsite echo the commercials' theme, but not their drama.