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Comment: Emails from America: Watching TV

Or should I say watching adverts

by Stuart Miles published on 26 June 2009

This week I've found myself watching the television quite a bit. Perhaps it's the excitement of getting cable or maybe just a way to interact with another culture.

Of course I say watching television, but in reality it really should be called watching adverts.

Wow. I've never seen so many adverts in such a short space of time as I have watching an evening of television in America. They seem to be every 10 minutes if not less. Even when a show claims to have less "commercials", as they are called here, there are still plenty to be seen.

What's even more interesting is where and when they come in the TV show. Normally you get an ad break just before the end of the show before the credits, only to get the credits, before getting another quick ad break. I finally get to the end of Seinfeld with the stand up bit after the credits.

Some channels like A&E suck you in to the next programme by forgoing that second ad so you find yourself watching the next episode before you know what's even going on. I've already found myself confused, asking my wife, "Is this the next show or just an ad break?" I dozed off for a moment. But not as confused as she was when the channel played the same movie again straight after - supposedly with the idea that if you missed the beginning you could catch it straight away making the film you just watched make sense. Bonkers.

With all these adverts and advert slots you would expect the adverts to be top notch, to be the best in the business.

Unfortunately they aren't, well certainly not compared to the UK offerings, which I have to say



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produces some of the best work in the world. Intelligent, funny, clever, and teasing. Now you could say that I am biased, as I am of course a Brit, used to watching the ad-free BBC thanks to my licence fee that I am now really grateful for having to pay, but for the most part a US advert involves two things.

1. Shouting at you as loud as they can
2. Telling you that the competition sucks and you should buy their product.

I can see why those Seinfeld-Gates adverts didn't work. They weren't focused enough for an American audience, and they certainly didn't meet the criteria above.

If you're really lucky you get to watch a drug advert that promises to fix your ailment in a flash. The problem however is that all medical related adverts - or commercials as I should call them - have to tell you verbally what the side effects are in the advert. It's one thing reading in the small print that taking said drug "might give you suicidal tendencies" but to have someone say it to you with a smile while doing something in a kitchen, as if they are about to reach for a knife is something completely different. Frightening even.

Back to the shouting, and the best of the best is an infomercial dude called Billy Mays. He will sell you anything from a bleach that cleans your clothes to probably one that cleans your teeth. His approach is to numb you into buying said product by telling you to do so about 20 times in 30 seconds. He talks so fast, so loud and so directly at you that you come away slightly blurry.

Of course when the adverts aren't showing, you do get quality American drama that we all know and love back home. Rather than only to be found on Sky One and Channel 4, every major network has an American drama about cops, doctors, or forensic scientists as they all vie for eyeballs.

Big in the US at the moment is Hawthorne, True

Blood, The Cleaner, and CSI featuring you guessed it doctors, vampires, addicts and cops. It's like they can't talk about anything else.

Of course if it's not drama its reality TV. While Big Brother doesn't seem to have caught on, Americans do have the usual array of I'm a celebrity get me out of here - currently with Lou Diamond Philips and some of the Baldwin clan. Then there is So You Think You Can Dance with Kat Deeley, America's got Talent with Simon Cowell and one that just the thought of makes us laugh - "Dance Your Ass Off" where, that's right, a selection of fat (or should we say large) contestants have to do just that.

So what am I watching? Mostly TV back in the UK thanks to the wonders of Slingbox. It's meant we can stay tuned in to the American dramas without the American ads - a lovely premise.

Stuart Miles is currently living in New York setting up the Pocket-lint US office.