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A Schwab Campaign Steeped in Personality

By STUART ELLIOTT

MOVE over, Two-Buck Chuck, as the Charles Shaw wines sold by Trader Joe's are called. Here comes another Chuck, seeking a lot more than a couple of dollars.

This Chuck is Chuck Schwab, a k a Charles R. Schwab, who is the centerpiece of a campaign started this week by the brokerage firm he founded. The campaign, for the [Charles Schwab](#) & Company unit of the Charles Schwab Corporation, has a budget that would buy an avid oenophile about 17.5 million bottles of Two-Buck Chuck.

The campaign is about Mr. Schwab even though he is not featured in the advertising, much as ads for the KFC restaurant chain are intended to evoke Colonel Harland Sanders without his actually appearing. The Schwab campaign carries the theme "Talk to Chuck," which appears as an eye-catching graphic device in the form of a dialogue balloon as would be found in a comic strip.

The campaign is the first national work for Schwab by Euro RSCG Worldwide in New York, the [Havas](#) agency that was awarded the company's brand and retail advertising account in December. The ads were tested in three cities - Chicago, Denver and Houston - before the national introduction, which began yesterday with television commercials and online ads and continues today in newspapers. PHD, part of the [Omnicom Group](#), is the Schwab media agency.

The campaign is directed at current and potential Schwab customers in a way meant to echo the informal yet focused approach of Mr. Schwab.

"It's a bit of a risky move," said Marc E. Babej, president of Reason Inc. in New York, a brand and corporate strategy consultant. "Talk to Chuck' sounds like, 'We love you, man.' "

But, he added, "it stands to get attention," and "if Chuck becomes an icon for the company, in a 'What would Chuck do?' way, it would help set Schwab apart in the marketplace."

That is particularly important for Schwab, he added, because it fights a two-front war, competing against lower-cost discount brokerage firms while battling for clients with full-service brokers.

The campaign is part of intensive efforts by Schwab to regain its footing after major missteps after the dot-com bust. The overhaul has included bringing back Mr. Schwab as chief executive, extensive cost-cutting and reducing trading commissions.

"The last year has really been about getting our act together," said Rebecca Saeger, executive vice president and chief marketing officer for Schwab in San Francisco. "We're looking at this as something to accelerate our momentum."

The reference was to Schwab's most recent earnings report, which showed that the profit for the three months ended in June was the best in five years.

Although Mr. Schwab may be absent from the ads, Ms. Saeger said, his spirit infuses the campaign.

"We felt what was more important than his appearing in the advertising was his leadership, his values," she said. "This takes everything he stands for and makes it bigger."

Mr. Schwab may turn up in future iterations of the campaigns, she added, and will "be visible in a lot of internal communication."

In the newspaper ads, signed by Mr. Schwab, he calls the "Talk to Chuck" theme "our promise to you that when you pick up the phone, go online or simply walk into a Schwab branch, you're speaking to someone who does business the way I do."

That thought is expressed in other ads with chatty, somewhat assertive headlines. For instance, one ad declares: "Waiting for the market to come back? The market's not waiting for you." Another ad asserts: "Want a great stock tip? Don't listen to stock tips."

A third ad offers this advice: "There's no such thing as an asset allocation bubble." A fourth ad admonishes: "'My house is worth a million' is not a retirement plan."

In TV commercials, characters representing investors speak out in plain language. One refers to a bad stock as a "dog." Another, wearing a T-shirt and a baseball cap as he barbecues outdoors, talks about paying "seven bucks a trade."

A third character, recalling the "big commissions" he paid to his full-service broker, wonders whether his investments are intended to guarantee "my kids' future - or his kids' future."

The tenor of the campaign is intended to resonate with investors scorched by the dot-com mania, who may still have in their portfolios stocks that one ad describes this way: "500 shares of stagnant. 250 shares of rudderless. 1,000 shares of dwindling."

It is not a matter of changing the voice Schwab uses in ads, said Ron Berger, chief executive for the New York and San Francisco offices of Euro RSCG, but rather "recreating it, getting it back to what it was."

"The difference between 'Chuck' and 'Charles Schwab' says a lot," he added.

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