

VW Jamaica-theme Super Bowl ad: Racist?

VW ad about a happy-go-lucky white guy who tells office mates to be happy in his Jamaican accent has been criticized by some.

No, Darth Vader — spurned by Volkswagen for this year's Super Bowl commercial — hasn't concocted cultural revenge. But the force is suddenly hitting VW, with vocal critics claiming its big game spot — this time featuring a white, Midwesterner who feigns a Jamaican accent — is racist. VW insists it will broadcast the ad during Sunday's game on CBS. "There is no thought to pulling it," says Tim Mahoney, chief product and marketing office at Volkswagen of America. It began showing online Monday and since then, has been a social-media buzz saw — with most folks liking it, but some critics totally trashing it. Long gone are the days when the Super Bowl was just a football championship. Now, it's also Madison Avenue's biggest one-day stage. As a result, lots of cultural causes, organizations and special-interest groups have tried to crowd in. The stage is littered with Super Bowl ads that eventually got yanked because of objections by interest groups — including two in 2007: a Snickers spot that showed two men reacting with disgust after accidentally sealing lips; and a General Motors spot that showed a robot appearing to commit suicide. VW is in a bit of hot water, with critics claiming its upcoming Super Bowl spot — this time featuring a white Midwesterner who feigns a Jamaican accent — is racist. Some would like them to be joined by this VW ad about a happy-go-lucky white guy who tells his office mates to be happy in his Jamaican accent. "It's pretty horrific," says Ricki Fairley-Brown, president of the multicultural marketing agency Dove Marketing. "Why do they have a white guy from Minnesota faking a Jamaican accent?" Even more troubled by the spot is Rochelle Newman-Carrasco, chief hispanic marketing strategist at Walton Isaacson, an African-American, Gay/Lesbian and Hispanic agency. "What happens in this ad is that the culture becomes a punch line, and that is offensive." Pop cultural guru Barbara Lippert is not amused, either. "It made me uncomfortable to see all of those white people in an office setting doing this," she says. "I found it offensive." Even then, she says, after offering a similar commentary on NBC's Today Show, "I've heard from thousands of people telling me to lighten up." An online polling of Today viewers concurred with that sentiment. More than 93% said they like the spot. So does Wykeham McNeill, Jamaica's minister of tourism and entertainment. "We view it as a compliment," says McNeill. "People should get into their inner Jamaica and get happy." He's even negotiating with VW for some sort of co-branding. As for the actor who stars in the spot, well, he's just hoping it gets to air. "People are entitled to their own opinion," says Erik Nicolaisen, the 33-year-old actor. But for a second opinion, he asked his brother-in-law, who is from Kingston, Jamaica. "He loves it." USA Today