



Encyclopedia of Major Marketing Campaigns

Thomas **Riggs**, editor





DR. MARTENS AIRWAIR USA, LLC

10 NW Tenth Ave.
Portland
Oregon
97209
USA

tel:
(503)222-6300
fax:
(503)222-6880

website:
<http://www.drmartens.com>

RED Campaign

Overview

Dr. Martens footwear stormed onto the U.S. fashion scene in the 1980s and became a near craze in the early 1990s among image-conscious youths. Though profits were favorable, London Underground International, the largest U.S. distributor of the British-made shoes, worried that Dr. Martens would become a passing trend. To preempt the demise of Dr. Martens's popularity, in 1993 London Underground hired advertising agency Cole & Weber of Portland, Oregon, to launch its first consumer advertising campaign to introduce the brand to a mass audience. The print campaign, which targeted consumer and trade publications, was Cole & Weber's first high-profile, national effort, with estimated billings of \$3.5 million.

The campaign sought to increase brand awareness by capitalizing on the Dr. Martens company's legendary history and high-quality products. The objective was to solidify Dr. Martens as an everlasting label rather than a fleeting fad. London Underground, which merged with Dr. Martens's manufacturer, R. Griggs Group Ltd., in the mid-1990s, also hoped to persuade retailers and industry executives with its excellence and knowledge as a distributor. The resulting ads featured an eye-catching red

background—hence the “Red” campaign—with an uncommon abundance of copy. The tone was humorous and slightly irreverent but informative, intended to advise readers about the quality of the shoes while maintaining an attitude of style and desirability. London Underground's Bill Berdan explained the campaign's objectives in the *Wall Street Journal* and asserted, “Rather than a fad, we want them [Dr. Martens shoes] to be a lifestyle.”

Historical Context

Although Dr. Martens's roots were planted in industrial 1960s England, the rugged shoes entered the U.S. market in the late 1980s as pure fashion. As outdoor footwear gained in popularity, Dr. Martens shoes, commonly referred to as “Docs,” became the brand of choice among teenagers and the 20-something crowd despite their price tag of around \$100. Wild Pair, a shoe store in St. Louis, indicated in early 1993 that Dr. Martens shoes had been a top seller for more than a year, and the brand began sneaking into mass-market sporting goods stores because of high demand. Many retailers attributed the popularity of Dr. Martens to a “must-have” phenomenon. Dr.

Martens projected an urban sensibility and nonconformity deemed attractive by youths. In short, the shoes were "cool." London Underground's Bob Naito commented on the Dr. Martens craze in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, noting that it was entirely consumer driven. Naito stated, "There is no orchestrated, organized Madison Avenue promotion." London Underground, in fact, had no advertising agency before hiring Cole & Weber in the fall of 1993, and manufacturer Griggs spent a mere 0.4 percent of sales on advertising in 1992.

The sales of Dr. Martens skyrocketed to the point that Griggs could not keep up with the demand. By 1993 Griggs was the largest shoemaker in England, with plans to open a larger factory and launch an apparel line. Griggs's export subsidiary, AirWair Ltd., saw exports double every year after its inception in April 1988, and London Underground enjoyed sales of \$20 million in the first half of 1993, compared to a total of \$7.5 million in 1992 and less than \$2 million in 1991, according to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. U.S. sales of Dr. Martens were expected to reach \$160 million in 1993, double the previous year's. Dr. Martens enjoyed great success, but London Underground worried that the brand would fall out of favor as soon as the next trend came along. In addition, as Dr. Martens became more popular and moved into mainstream stores, it was possible that the shoes might drop in status among the crowd that eagerly purchased them because they were unique. The brand needed to overcome fad status and prove its legitimacy and viability.

Target Market

The chunky-soled, industrial-style Dr. Martens shoes did not begin as a fashion statement. Created in the mid-1940s by German physician Klaus Maertens after a skiing accident prompted him to develop a comfortable, air-cushioned shoe for rehabilitation purposes, the shoes reached England in the 1960s, where they were promoted as industrial work wear, comfortable and tough enough for factory floors. Dr. Martens shoes were adopted by British police, nurses, and postal workers but also found a loyal, more publicized market among punk rock musicians in the 1960s and 1970s. The brand became associated with rebellion and

Cool or Crude?

Some people took offense with the "Red" campaign's slightly irreverent tone. One ad, for example, referred to a 20-footed caterpillar as a "lucky little bastard." Cole & Weber's Debby Kennedy defended the copy and told *Forbes*, "It's more honest and direct because it's the way people talk." Effective ads, Kennedy maintained, should reflect the vocabulary of the target audience."

nonconformity, and American teens latched on, charmed by Dr. Martens's cult status and legendary past.

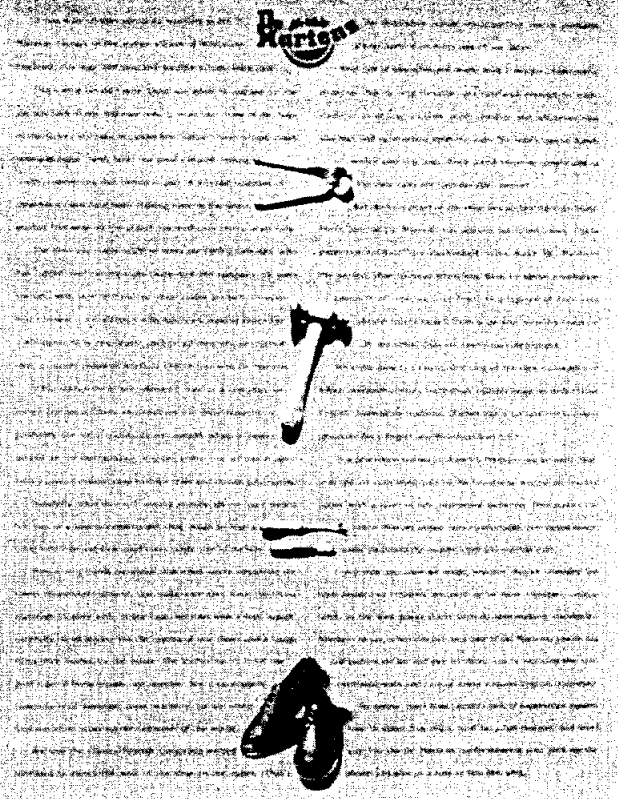
London Underground hoped to lure a wider audience to Dr. Martens shoes with the "Red" campaign. Naito told the *Portland Oregonian* that he planned to target an older market of baby boomers and working-class consumers who appreciated comfort and durability in addition to style. Cole & Weber wanted to attract young adult males and believed that emphasizing the company's outstanding workmanship and rich past would convince this group that Dr. Martens was an enduring brand. Although the style-conscious youth market was aware of the shoes' quality, fashion offered the greater allure, and if Cole & Weber hoped to sway adult males, it needed to de-emphasize the trendiness of Dr. Martens and focus on factors that concerned that audience, such as quality and authenticity.

Competition

When London Underground decided to undertake a mass advertising endeavor, it was riding a wave of success. Because of the distinctive look of Docs and the clout the brand carried among youth, Dr. Martens faced little direct competition in the U.S. market. Although the Dr. Martens label helped the company succeed, it could also be its downfall when the shoes went out of style. London Underground needed to elevate Dr. Martens from fashion-craze status to a legitimate brand in order to survive in the footwear industry. The company also had to battle numerous cheap imitations that flooded the market soon after Dr. Martens became popular. As Naito told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "Everybody in the world is knocking off the product with synthetics from Tai-



*Gerald Corby
has been making
Dr. Martens
for over 22 years.
Rookie.*



From the "Red"
campaign for Dr.
Martens.

wan." As the style headed into a more mainstream market, Dr. Martens faced the risk that consumers would ignore the label and choose the less expensive shoes.

Dr. Martens owed some of its popularity to the growth of the outdoor footwear market in the early 1990s. In the 1980s athletic shoes dominated the footwear industry, peaking in 1990 when Americans purchased nearly 400 million pairs. The market became saturated, however, and the following year retail sales dropped 2.5 percent, according to the Athletic Footwear Association. Nike Inc. and Reebok International Ltd., leaders in the athletic shoe arena, suffered declines in their stock prices and scrambled to introduce shoe lines that catered to the new outdoor trend. Hiking boots and rugged styles came into prominence, and Dr. Martens shared the lime-light with traditional outdoor shoe manufacturers such as Timberland and Vasque.

Marketing Strategy

When faced with the challenge of giving legitimacy and longevity to Dr. Martens, Cole & Weber chose to combine the brand's cutting-edge and irreverent attitude with its European

heritage and detailed history. The combination, the agency hoped, would lend an air of authenticity to the brand while maintaining its hip aura. Cole & Weber creative director Jim Carey noted in *Adweek*, "This shoe has a huge tradition in England as a comfortable, utilitarian shoe . . . We wanted to give it a history, so that once it stops being a fad, it would still have a life." What resulted was a series of print ads featuring long, detailed copy about the quality and durability of the footwear in a humorous manner. Art director Joe Shands recalled in *Adweek*, "People thought we should do real in-your-face, grunge stuff . . . Instead we told these long, intelligent and funny stories and made the visuals really different." The full-page and two-page spreads with cherry red backgrounds appeared in consumer magazines, including *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *GQ*, and *Esquire*.

The ad "Cop" featured a black-and-white photograph of a purse snatcher running from a British police officer. The headline read, "As it turns out, Dr. Martens has been making running shoes for over 30 years." The copy of nearly 700 words began with "Admit it. You read the headline and then looked right at the thug."

It continued to explain, "Well, you might want to take a second look. This time at the bobby. If he wasn't running so bloody fast you probably would have noticed that he's wearing a pair of Dr. Martens as well." The ad went on to provide intricate details about the shoes' special air-cushioned sole, unparalleled construction, and emphasized that "it's no wonder Dr. Martens became so popular with people who spend long days on their feet. Factory workers, the English police force, and now even English lawyers and accountants." An *Adweek* review of "Cop" commented, "Such practicality gives the brand a proletarian chic, helping sustain the Docs mystique among people who care about style as well as comfort."

The headline for the ad "Rookie" was "Gerald Corby has been making Dr. Martens for over 22 years. Rookie." The photograph showed an elderly man working on boots. "Lousy Skier" used a photograph of a man attempting to ski, his hat flying off his head. The headline read, "Dr. Klaus Maertens. Inventor, painter, M.D. and, fortunately for all of us, a damned lousy skier." The text explained how and why Maertens had invented the shoe. "Imitation" directly addressed competitors, its title stating, "There are imitation Dr. Martens. And when you wear them people will say, 'Hey, look, imitation Dr. Martens.'" The copy then spelled out the distinguishing elements of Dr. Martens and noted that the shoes were made by "real, 100% authentic British men and women." The ad implored, "So, please, don't be fooled into buying a lesser pair of shoes. Your feet will know the difference. Your friends will know the difference. And so will everyone who sees you wearing them."

"Success" was one of the ads that appeared in trade magazines. This set of ads was designed to persuade retailers that London Underground was the most knowledgeable distributor of Dr. Martens shoes. The headline stated, "Hold this shoe up to your nose. That's success you're smelling," and the copy announced London Underground's national advertising campaign. The ad also discussed the popularity

of the shoes and stated, "You should also know that London Underground has more Dr. Martens in stock than any other distributor on the planet." Another trade ad claimed, "If there were a category about Dr. Martens on Jeopardy, our sales reps would win it."

Outcome

Dr. Martens continued to flourish. In 1995 a German magazine ranked Dr. Martens as one of the 30 most recognized global brands, and manufacturer Griggs took control of U.S. distribution, dropping several distributors and forming a joint venture with London Underground to coordinate all U.S. efforts. Efforts to lift Dr. Martens out of fad status continued, and a line of apparel and other products, including bags, watches, and school items, followed, along with a Dr. Martens department store in Britain in late 1994. Stephen Griggs, the manufacturing company's managing director, indicated in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "I think there are people who will always wear Doc Martens in the same way as there are people that will always wear jeans."

The "Red" campaign shot advertising agency Cole & Weber into national prominence. The agency won numerous industry honors, including several at the 1994 One Show as well as the Andy and Kelly awards. The campaign also received recognition in *Communication Arts* magazine's 1994 annual advertising edition and won a number of the Portland Advertising Federation's Rosey Awards. Although Cole & Weber continued to represent Dr. Martens through 1995, U.S. advertising efforts were cut back as Dr. Martens settled into its new distribution network.

Further Reading

- Berger, Warren, "Cole & Weber," *Communication Arts*, March/April 1994, pp. 66ff.
- Hill, Jim, "Ad Agency Gets Dr. Martens Account," *Portland Oregonian*, October 21, 1993, p. C1.
- Voight, Joan, Kathy Tyrer, and Shelly Garcia, "Adweek's 1994 Western Creative All-Stars," *Adweek*, August 15, 1994, p. 33.

MARIKO FUJINAKA