



Cracking the Commercial Code

by Sandra Merrill

One of the most often heard comments from actors auditioning for commercials is “I don’t know what the client wants.” Adding to the conundrum, is the client’s axiom, “I don’t know what I want, but I know what I need.” So how does an actor determine what the client wants in preparing for commercial auditions?

Firstly, actors should be watching lots of commercials. Instead of zipping through the commercials to get to the pre-recorded shows, actors could be watching different network shows for the purposes of studying commercials. (Commercials can also be viewed on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)). Because of different demographics, commercial styles vary depending on the network, program, and time of day the commercials air. And similar to auditioning for television, whereby actors watch programs to inform themselves of the acting style, watching advertisers’ campaigns will give you insights as to the tenor of the spots. Is the advertiser using comedy, as in the Ameriquest ads “Don’t Judge Too Quickly”, or is it “slice of life” as used in Mastercard’s “For Everything Else” campaign, or the ultra-realism of Volkswagon’s “Safety Happens.” If you’ve seen the spots, you’ll know the type of performances being used.

Secondly, what the client is always seeking, is the actor who gets the gist of the spot, and then brings something unique to their performance. Actors sometimes underestimate the work involved in auditioning for commercials. Having decided that commercials are mostly based on a “look”, they put a modicum of forethought into their auditions, and then leave the session feeling “I could’ve done better”. Actors shouldn’t come into the session relying on the camera operator for direction, who’ll provide such information as “pretend you’re talking to a buddy” or “keep it real” but who can’t tell you how to act the part. The actor does this by establishing the objective and then takes it to the next level by creating something that isn’t on the page. This happens when the actor is able to visualize the spot and make specific choices, incorporating improvisation, adlib or body language, to add dimension and nuance to the role. In this instance, the actor has stopped trying to figure out what the client wants, and is now showing the client what the role needs.

Thirdly, when it comes to auditioning for commercials, it’s not a one size fits all proposition. There is no “magic bullet” or one way to audition, because there’s not one type of audition. Depending on the spot, actors will be expected to bring different levels of skill and performance to the audition. Actors who are informed and willing to put in the work, are on the path to cracking the commercial code.