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A Spokesman Finds Fame Interviewing Tiny Experts

By STUART ELLIOTT

How ubiquitous are those AT&T commercials with the inquisitive guy talking earnestly with the cute, lippy children? So ubiquitous that the guy — a comedian, actor and writer named Beck Bennett — sometimes finds himself, despite his best intentions, watching himself on television.

“They catch me by surprise,” Mr. Bennett said of the spots. “I’ll be at a bar with friends on a Friday or Saturday, and they come on.”

“It’s pretty surreal,” he added.

In nearly two dozen commercials so far, Mr. Bennett plays a deadpan interlocutor who takes children seriously, drawing them out in wry exchanges that are partly scripted and mostly improvised — or, as Mr. Bennett describes it, “like ‘The Colbert Report’ meets ‘Kids Say the Darndest Things.’”

In one spot, a child triumphantly shouts “infinity times infinity” as the biggest number any of them can think of, prompting Mr. Bennett to gesture like his head will explode.

In another, which has run in a near-endless loop on television lately, a little girl says she’ll use the money she saves to buy a “changer machine” to turn her brother into a puppy.

“Couldn’t you just buy an actual puppy?” Mr. Bennett asks.

“Yeah, but if my brother’s a puppy,” she says, “I could bring him to show and tell and say, ‘Hey everybody, here’s my puppy-brother.’”

“Well,” Mr. Bennett declares, “When you say it like that, it makes perfect sense.”

With that kind of delivery, Mr. Bennett, 28, has been widely credited with keeping viewers engaged (along with the charming children) despite the thousands of times the spots are appearing each day, locally and nationally, on broadcast and cable television. They can also be watched on the AT&T channel on YouTube. There are also radio and online versions. The commercials began running in November as part of an AT&T campaign, created by the

BBDO Atlanta division of BBDO North America, that carries the theme “It’s not complicated.”

“Verizon, in its ads, was making a superiority claim, saying, ‘We’re bigger,’ ” said Gary M. Stibel, chief executive at the New England Consulting Group in Norwalk, Conn. “AT&T puts on an adult with a bunch of kids who say, ‘Faster is better than slower’ and ‘Bigger is better than smaller.’ The take-away is ‘AT&T is better.’ ”

Although the AT&T campaign is still in its early days — compared with a long-running campaign like “Reach out and touch someone,” which AT&T ran from 1979 to 1984 — Mr. Beck seems poised to join a lengthy list of actors who become synonymous with the brands they advertise by dint of the popularity of the campaigns, how often the campaigns appear or both.

Others include John Houseman, who declared in ads for Smith Barney, “We make money the old-fashioned way — we earn it”; and Jan Miner, who played a manicurist named Madge in commercials for Palmolive dishwashing liquid.

David Christopher, chief marketing officer at the AT&T Mobility division of AT&T, praised Mr. Bennett’s role in making the AT&T campaign “wildly successful, more so than we could’ve imagined,” as demonstrated by measurements like views on YouTube — one of the most popular had 1.18 million views as of Tuesday evening — and positive comments in social media.

“His tone is deferential and his comedic timing is awesome; the whole construct works,” Mr. Christopher said. “It’s the perfect mix of hard-hitting, competitive messages with cute and compelling content.”

During the first three months of this year, the most recent period for which data are available, AT&T spent \$504 million to buy advertising in major media, according to Kantar Media, a division of WPP that tracks ad spending. Although that total includes many other campaigns in addition to Mr. Bennett’s commercials, it is indicative of how frequently the spots turn up; the sheer weight can drive home the AT&T brand name for those viewers who are so entertained that they may miss or forget who the sponsor is.

Mr. Bennett’s effectiveness may stem from the time he has spent honing his skills in playing a character who interviews children, as shown on a Web series, “Fresh Perspectives,” that he created in 2011. A year later, he auditioned for, and landed, an online campaign for AT&T, “Brackets by Six-Year-Olds,” in which he asked children to select teams that could win the

N.C.A.A. men's basketball tournament. The response to that campaign led to the creation of the "It's not complicated" commercials and Mr. Bennett's signing of a long-term contract.

"We thought, 'We should use this guy for something bigger,' " said David Lubars, chairman and chief creative officer at BBDO North America in New York.

"The beauty is" that Mr. Bennett gives the impression "he really thinks the children have the answers he's seeking," he added, "like a journalist interviewing knowledgeable subjects."

At first, Mr. Bennett said, "I wasn't sure whether the commercials being played as often as they are would affect my career," worrying that he might be pigeonholed.

But "it's been fantastic," he added, citing opportunities that include a movie, "Intramural," that he is starting to film, and a Web series, "Next Time Online."

He has also had "a lot of people reach out to me to host shows" in which he would play a version of his AT&T character, he said, adding: "It was so hard to say no but I was like, that's not going to happen. AT&T has some involvement in the idea of the character, and the likeness."

Mr. Bennett, who grew up in suburban Chicago, studied acting at the University of Southern California, from which he graduated in 2007. With his experience in online video, he said, "it has been interesting to see that power that television still has" to set the agenda for popular culture.

Now, many spots later, the question arises, Will there come a time when Mr. Bennett is old hat? The goal, according to Mr. Lubars, is for him to remain "a family friend you're happy to see, instead of 'that guy again.' "

Mr. Christopher of AT&T said he believed that "when you get something like this, you stick with it," but at the same time "we measure this campaign, and all of our campaigns, in myriad ways."

Mr. Bennett said, "I'm surprised myself that it hasn't worn out its welcome," attributing that to factors like the absence of typical ad tactics like a catchphrase or products being peddled on screen.

Perhaps the main ingredient is the "very genuine reactions of the kids," he said. "Their spontaneity, their honesty, it doesn't get old."