

An Appeal to my Fellow Commercial Actors

By Jim Meskimen

I've been a professional actor now for over 25 years. During that time I've been involved with the making of many hundreds of TV and radio commercials.

Commercials are one of the ways we actors stay alive thru times between other, more artistic projects like plays, films and television shows. One can make a good living indeed in commercials, although this has become increasingly rare for the "workaday" actor.

For an audition recently I was sent a piece of copy (the text one is to speak in a commercial) that caught my eye.

I don't audition for absolutely any sort of product under the sun; I have particular prejudices against certain classes of products and services and refuse to support them just for a paycheck. Most actors have similar scruples.

By accident, I was sent a script for a sleep medication. I have instructed my agents long ago that I don't pitch pharmaceuticals in commercials for personal reasons. So I rarely have actually seen in bold type this sort of narration:

"Sleepwalking, and eating or driving while not fully awake, with amnesia for the event as well as abnormal behaviors have been reported.

In patients with depression, worsening of depression, including risk of suicidal thoughts or actions, may occur."

Now, I have heard things like this on TV and have guffawed, as perhaps you have, at the juxtaposition of cheery, sunlit scenes of fun and recreation that typically accompany this kind of voiceover. But I didn't really credit what revulsion the words inspire on their own without the rosy scenes of harmony filling the screen as eye candy.

Yikes!

So, if I read the above correctly, (which is, after all, my job) what the warnings for this pill infer is that you might, after taking this drug, fall asleep, then get into a car, drive around for an indeterminate amount of time STILL ASLEEP and then awake later with possibly no recollection of what you'd done or where you'd been.

That seems to me to be a pretty good guarantee of homicide. I know what it is like to drive when drowsy from lack of sleep; I really have no experience at all, thank God, with driving while completely unconscious. But, I can't imagine a scarier thought than waking up in my own car and realizing I must have been doing some driving while asleep during the night.

And what about the last bit: “worsening of depression, including risk of suicidal thoughts or actions, may occur.”

Okay, “suicidal actions.” What are they? Cutting one’s wrists? Stepping out in front of a semi? Walking on a high ledge? Taking an overdose of the same pills that caused the suicidal feelings in the first place?

The warning goes on to instruct the viewer to contact a doctor immediately if any of these symptoms occur. That’s nice. But would there be necessarily time or even the inclination to do so? If one is feeling and acting suicidal, doesn’t it seem unlikely they would reach for help? And what if the suicidal actions occur during that time when the guy is unconsciously driving down the highway?

Okay, so all that is very grim, but my argument is really not about the drug companies, who have evidently made peace with their consciences long ago regarding “side effects”.

But what of an actor who would read these lines for money?

Here’s how I look at it. How comfortable would you feel explaining to a child, say, that medicine they were taking, or that their parents were taking, might possibly cause them to kill themselves? Or that dad or mom might be driving the family car around while dead asleep, probably not stopping on red and going on green?

It gets clear to me when I look at it from that angle.

Look, I’m no angel. I’ve done commercials for banks for crying out loud. (Many of which don’t exist anymore.)

But to claim that a product is a wonderful solution for a common problem, then pleasantly add the caveat that one reason the problem won’t be a bother anymore is because the user will be too dead from the treatment to notice it, is a bit beyond the pale.

So, if you, like me, depend on advertising for some of your income, consider what I’ve tried to convey here.

The world would be a better place if we all treated each other with more kindness. And telling harmful things thinly disguised as boilerplate “side effects” is no way to express kindness, or earn a living.

The End