

For Bank, Bruce Willis Is Better Than Cabbage

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Bruce Willis staring out at Muscovites on the Garden Ring on Monday. **Vladimir Filonov**

Bruce Willis' tough-guy persona jump-started a new advertising campaign for National Bank Trust this Monday, in a contract that sources say will bring him \$3 million over two years and an image of stability to the bank.

Billboards will encourage potential customers to take out loans and make new deposits, and they will feature Willis in a leather jacket smirking next to a giant slogan: "Trust, it's just like me, only [it's] a bank."

"Bruce Willis is power. He works much better than cabbage," Dmitry Chukseyev, communications vice president at Trust, told The Moscow Times.

This summer Trust had to cancel its last marketing campaign that used cabbage — Russian slang for cash — as a symbol, when a competing bank claimed that it had already registered

the beloved vegetable as a its trademark.

Of all celebrities, both Russian and foreign, the average Russian thinks of Willis as one of their own, according to GfK RUS, a global market research firm, which Trust commissioned to help find the right face for their new marketing campaign.

Vladimir Turchinsky, Russia's most well-known hunk and television presenter, had been the macho image of the bank until 2009, when he died of a heart attack at the age of 46.

Trust had another campaign, in which scantily clad girls hid behind a Russian flag, that was effective but controversial. It rubbed the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service the wrong way, which considered the use of state symbols offensive and thus breaking Russia's law on advertising.

By the end of the year, billboards with Willis, popularized by the “Die Hard” series, or “Tough Nut” in the Russian translation, will be seen in 170 cities across Russia, including Moscow and St. Petersburg. Willis will also appear on the Internet and in promotion materials at local branches.

“His image has strengthened throughout his professional career. Like any other person he has had his ups and downs, but it's been pretty steady. He's stable,” Chukseyev said, adding that he hopes the actor's charisma and a sense of stability will be associated with the bank's reputation.

Trust is among Russia's top 30 largest banks by total assets, with several hundred branches throughout the country. But in 2009, it had losses of 773 million rubles (\$25.37 million) under Russian Accounting Standards, RIA-Novosti reported in July. At that time, Trust severed ties with Fitch Ratings Agency, which had expressed concern about the quality of the bank's assets and downgraded its long-term default rating.

But consumers believe that if a company can afford a big celebrity then they must be doing well, according to marketing experts.

In late 2009, Willis received a 3.3 percent stake estimated at about \$4 million in France's Belvedere in exchange for a four-year contract to promote its Sobieski vodka globally. Following that announcement, the company's share value immediately went up.

Willis will get \$3 million from Trust for two years' worth of advertising that will not include television appearances, a source close to the deal told The Moscow Times.

Chukseyev, contractually obliged not to disclose the terms of the deal, did not confirm or deny the figure, but said the amount Trust was paying Willis was within the bank's annual advertising budget.

Celebrity marketing, which employs famous people to promote products and services, peaked in the West in the '90s but is gaining popularity in Russia.

Few foreign celebrities have advertised Russian products, but those who have gave a good boost to the local brands, marketing experts say.

Among Russian companies who hired foreign celebrities are L'Etoile, with French singer Patricia Kaas, and Gazprom Neft, which hired actor Jason Statham to advertise its G-Energy motor oils.

Russian celebrities have found their way to the international advertising scene, too — though more as an exception than a rule.

Maria Sharapova, Russia's star tennis player has been advertising everything from sports equipment to watches.

In 2007, Mikhail Gorbachev took part in an ad for Louis Vuitton's travel bags. In the advertisement, which appeared in Vogue and New York magazine, Gorbachev is being driven in a limo past the remains of the Berlin Wall.

A magazine was visible in Gorbachev's travel bag that read in Russian: “Litvinenko's Murder — They Wanted to Give Up a Suspect for \$7,000.”

“If you pick the right celebrity that caters to your target audience's taste, the campaign will be successful,” said Olga Andreyeva, account manager at Ogilvy Action, part of Ogilvy Group, which created the Gorbachev advertisement.

“The Gorbachev ad was really successful. We still have clients in the premium sector come to us and say, we want [our ad] to be like that one,” Andreyeva said.

Willis was a good choice, Andreyeva said, because Trust is targeting the average Russian, who, research shows, prefers foreigners in ads.

“The power of Hollywood is stronger than that of Channel One,” Chukseyev said.

In comparison, Channel One television host Ivan Urgant, who ranked the highest among Russian celebrities in the research used by Trust, scored half the points Willis did.

Tough guys seem to be popular among Russians, with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone high up on the list. Johnny Depp is popular among some Russians but disliked by others, Chukseyev said.

The research confirms that citizenship is not an issue. A tough American cop who saves the world time and time again is still Russia's hero.

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