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“Dumb Ways to Die”: Advertising Train Safety (B)

After consulting with platform staff and train drivers, John Mescall, executive creative director at McCann Melbourne, wrote the copy for the ad, with animation by Julian Frost. The catchy jingle was written by The Cat Empire keyboardist, Ollie McGill, and performed by Tinpan Orange singer, Emily Lubitz.¹ The ad itemized 18 dumb ways to die (including, for example, “Keep a rattlesnake as pet, Sell both kidneys on the internet”), followed by three train-safety-related messages about not standing on the platform edge, not driving around level crossing boom gates, and not running across train tracks between platforms. The text of the three-minute ad is reproduced in **Exhibit 1** and a storyboard of the ad is shown in **Exhibit 2**.

The accompanying animated video showed egg-shaped, pastel-colored characters being blown up, poisoned, electrocuted, or otherwise killing themselves, all to a cheery and memorable nursery rhyme tune.

Mescall, who described the ad as “dark humor delivered with joy,” summarized the purpose of the campaign: “We want to create a lasting understanding that you shouldn’t take risks around trains, that the prospect of death or serious injury is ever-present and that we as a community need to be aware of what constitutes both safe and dumb behavior.”²

The media budget for the campaign was limited to around \$200,000. MT could extend the campaign to signage on its trains and at its stations where the tune was played without lyrics on station platforms. Some advertising time was purchased in cinemas showing youth-oriented movies. But a major objective was to attract free public relations coverage in traditional and social media. The agency tried to increase shareability by creating clips from the video and sharing them via Tumblr. Apart from uploading the “Dumb Ways to Die” public service announcement on YouTube on November 14, 2013 writing the first comment, and providing links to buy the song on iTunes, agency personnel did not give media interviews or try to promote the campaign in any way.³

The video was soon posted on the Internet humor site 9gag, where it obtained over 37,000 Facebook shares and 27,000 up votes within 10 days. The song quickly reached the top 10 on iTunes and sold 10,000 copies within three weeks on Nielsen SoundScan. By early December, the video spawned at least 80 cover versions (including classic rock), 90 parodies, and 30 million YouTube hits.⁴ Samples of the parodies are presented in **Exhibit 3**. MT launched a karaoke version of the song.

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Leah Waymark, MT's general manager for corporate relations, commented: "To have young people singing about safety around trains is just a terrific outcome for us. Some people might have an issue of us making light of a serious topic, but if we can save one life or avoid serious injury, that's how we'll measure success."⁵

By December, Mescall concluded: "It's entered popular culture."⁶

Exhibit 1 "Dumb Ways to Die" Lyrics

Set fire to your hair
Poke a stick at a grizzly bear
Eat medicine that's out of date
Use your private parts as piranha bait

Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die
Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die

Get your toast out with a fork
Do your own electrical work
Teach yourself how to fly
Eat a two week old unrefrigerated pie

Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die
Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die

Invite a psycho-killer inside
Scratch a drug dealer's brand new ride
Take your helmet off in outer space
Use your clothes dryer as a hiding place

Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die
Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die

Keep a rattlesnake as pet
Sell both the kidneys on the internet
Eat a tube of super-glue
"I wonder what's this red button do?"

Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die
Dumb ways to die
So many dumb ways to die

Dress up like a moose during hunting season
Disturb a nest of wasps for no good reason
Stand on the edge of a train station platform
Drive around the boom gates at a level
crossing
Run across the tracks between the platforms
They may not rhyme but they're quite
possibly

Dumbest ways to die
Dumbest ways to die
Dumbest ways to die
So many dumb
So many dumb ways to die

SPOKEN: [Be safe around trains. A message
from Metro]

*vocalist: Emily Lubitz, from the band Tinpan Orange.
music: Ollie McGill, from the band [the Cat Empire](#).*

Source: <http://www.anysonglyrics.com/lyrics/t/Tangerine-Kitty/Dumb-Ways-To-Die.htm>, September 16, 2013.

Exhibit 2 Storyboard for "Dumb Ways to Die"

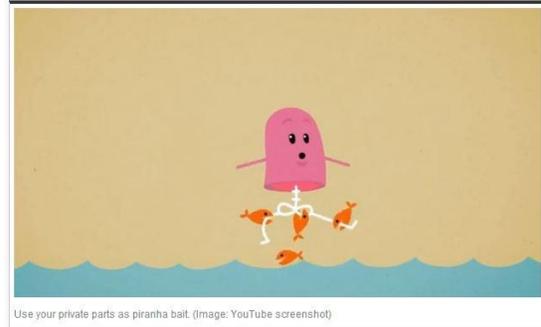
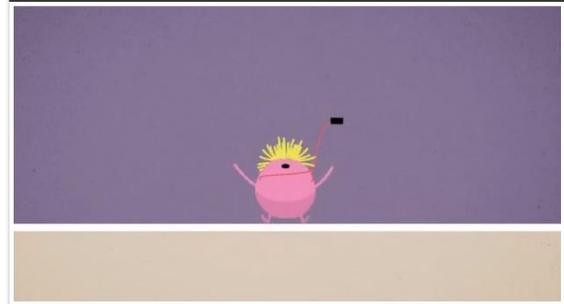


Exhibit 2 (continued)



Scratch a drug dealer's brand new ride. (Image: YouTube screenshot)



Stand on the edge of the train platform. (Image: YouTube screenshot)



Sell both your kidneys on the Internet. (Image: YouTube screenshot)



Drive around the gate blocking you from crossing the tracks. (Image: YouTube screenshot)



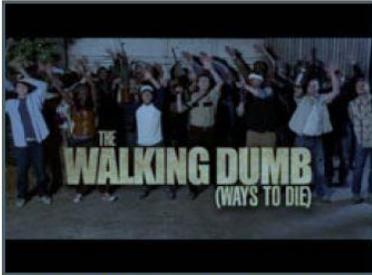
Dress like a moose in hunting season. (Image: YouTube screenshot)



Cross the tracks between platforms. (Image: YouTube screenshot)

Source: Illustrations excerpted from Liz Klimas, *The Blaze*, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/11/21/this-is-the-viral-australian-dumb-ways-to-die-psa-that-glenn-beck-loves-and-will-be-stuck-in-your-head-all-day/>, accessed August 2013.

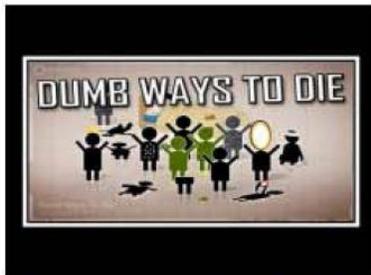
Exhibit 3 "Dumb Ways to Die" Parody Samples



[The Walking Dead + Dumb Ways...](#)
[Dumb Ways to Die](#)
[Uploaded by WarPig](#)



[Dumb Ways To Die Parody: Dumb...](#)
[Dumb Ways to Die](#)
[Uploaded by Alex Mercer](#)



[\[f\] Portal - Dumb Ways To Die](#)
[Dumb Ways to Die](#)
[Uploaded by BongDong DingDong](#)



[Annoying Orange - Annoying Wa..](#)
[Dumb Ways to Die](#)
[Uploaded by Leonidas Da King](#)



[Dumb Ways to Die](#)
[Uploaded by Don](#)

Source: Illustrations excerpted from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dumb-ways-to-die>, accessed August 2013.

Endnotes

¹ Barbara Lippert, "'Dumb Ways To Die' Is Charmingly Gruesome," *MediaPost.com*, June 2013, <http://www.mediapost.com>, accessed September 2013.

² Lucinda Beaman, "Stupidity Goes Viral as it Finds an Audience to Die For," *The Times* (London), December 1, 2012, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/australia-newzealand/article3616388.ece>, accessed August 2013.

³ McCann Australia, "All Work," <http://www.mccann.com.au/project/dumb-ways-to-die>, accessed August 2013.

⁴ Nancy Szokan and M. Fard, "Video on 'Dumb Ways to Die' Attracts Millions of Online Viewers," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/video-on-dumb-ways-to-die-attracts-millions-of-online-viewers/2012/12/03/a1fbb290-6964-11e1-acc6-32f6c7ccd67_story.html, accessed August 2013.

⁵ "Safety ads a global hit," *TheAge*, June 20, 2013, <http://newsstore.theage.com.au/apps/viewDocument.ac?page=1&sy=age&kw=dumb+w+to+die&pb=age&dt=selectRange&dr=6months&so=relevance&sf=text&sf=author&rc=100&rm=200&sp=nrm&clsPage=1&docID=AGE1306206F7ML7VO74F>, accessed August 2013.

⁶ Asher Moses, "Safety Video Goes Viral, Not Bad for a Dumb Idea," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 30, 2012.