Uncle Sam Makes Appeal to Mom

Defense Department Aims Latest Recruitment Ads At Parents of Prospects

A NEW PENTAGON recruitment campaign takes aim not at 18-year-old thrill-seekers, but at their reluctant parents.

Beginning today, the Defense Department will run advertisements in People, Sports Illustrated and other major publications in a multipronged, print-media blitz that will last through July. The ads feature a hat fitter, a football champion and other older veterans talking about how military experience has helped to anchor their civilian lives. The idea is not to woo men and women of soldiering age, but the adults who would talk them into enlisting.

"Based on market research, we targeted adult 'influencers' like parents and, especially, reticent mothers," says Maj. Joe Allegretti of the Air Force, who works for the Defense Department's Joint Advertising Market Research and Studies Program. "We're looking at adults who have aspirations, hopes, dreams and ambitions for their children."

Among the veterans featured in the ads is Chad Hennings, a 36-year-old former Dallas Cowboy and former Air Force officer. The ad notes that Mr. Hennings achieved success in professional football not just through physical prowess but also "because his four years at the Air Force Academy and tour of duty flying A-10-Thunderbolt missions during Operation Provide Comfort provided him with a regimen they don't teach in training camp."

Another ad features Valerie Vigoda, a violinist in a band called GrooveLily. The text touts some of the qualities she picked up in the Army National Guard: "Stamina. Follow-through. And what she calls 'the ability to play the hand you're dealt.' " Other veterans featured in the ads include James Romero, a 31-year-old hat fitter who was a Marine Corps corporal, and Mark Jones, chief executive of Tuft-Jones Security and a former master sergeant in the Army Rangers.

Most military-recruitment advertising has relied on stirring images of young men scaling mountains and leaping from helicopters. Military advertisers have targeted adults before, but only by featuring "proud parents" looking toward a "bright future," says Maj. Allegretti.

The change in approach came after a study last year by WirthlinWorldwide, a Reston, Va., market researcher, showed only 11% of adults surveyed would recommend the military to their children as a career option after high school. It was intended to respond to the less-than-stellar growth in military enrollment after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Indeed, between June 2001 and March 2003, recruitment rose by only 2.7%, officials say. Unexpectedly, "Sept. 11 did not translate into a spike in enlistment," acknowledges Maj. Allegretti.

After the military decided on the approach, it had 17 advertising firms compete to create a campaign that would begin with an initial $1.7 million budget.

Mullen, based in Wenham, Mass., won the contract, replacing an existing campaign by Cordiant Communications Group's Bates North America, officials say.

"We talked to hundred of parents, coaches, priests and people who worked with youth and, through interviewing them, we gained an understanding of the issues and an understanding of our strategy," says George Rogers, an executive vice president with Mullen.

In addition to the print ads, the Pentagon plans to send a television public service announcement, in 30-, 60- and possibly 15-second versions, to major-market TV stations in mid-July.