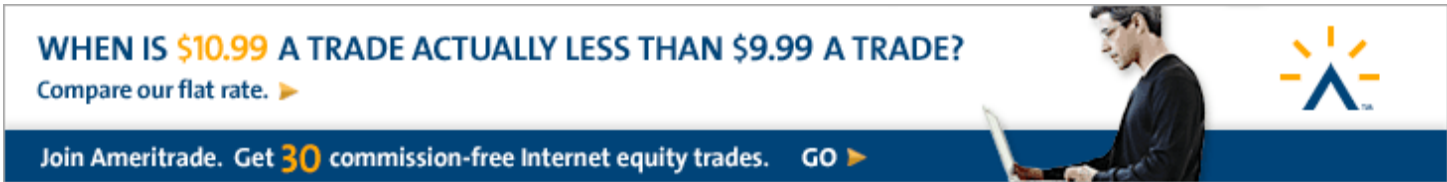


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ADVERTISING

Best Product in a Leading Role

By **STUART ELLIOTT**

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NOW that the nominees for the 77th annual Academy Awards have been announced, it is time to consider a category that also deserves its due: best product in a leading role.

Last year provided a bumper crop of nominees for the make-believe category, reflecting the increasing interconnectedness of Madison Avenue and Hollywood. As with the actual categories, the candidates for the fanciful best-product award have been winnowed to five nominees, all from Oscar-nominated films. Here is a look at them.

AFLAC The familiar duck that promotes the supplemental health insurance sold by Aflac made its film debut in "Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events," appearing briefly in a scene playing, well, itself. In the scene, the duck, inside a boat during a storm, is squarely in the path of an unfortunate event involving a flaming stove.

"We were as concerned as Paramount was that if we would do it, it would not be commercial and compromise the film," said Laura Kane, second vice president at Aflac in Columbus, Ga., referring to the Paramount Pictures division of **Viacom**, which released the movie.

Initially, Ms. Kane said, the script "started with the duck saying the entire word 'Aflac,' " as it does in the series of spots created by the Aflac agency, the Kaplan Thaler Group in New York, part of the **Publicis Groupe**. "But we thought that was too commercial," she added, "so it just blurts, 'Aaaaaaaaaaaaa!'"



Merie W. Wallace/Fox Searchlight Pictures
One nominee could be the Sanford wines sold by the Terlato Wine Group, which is among the brands featured in the movie "Sideways."

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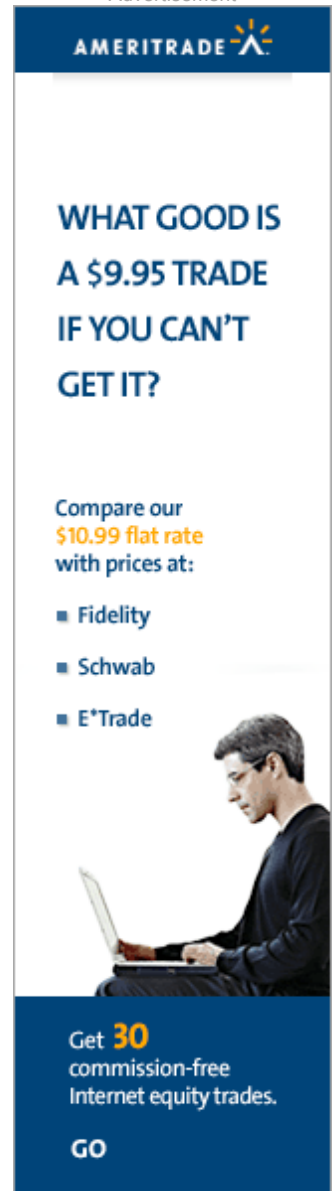
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SANFORD Speaking of vintage, "Sideways," set in the wine country of Santa Barbara County, Calif., is a veritable brandapalooza, with the Sanford line sold by the Terlato Wine Group playing perhaps the most prominent part.

The Sanford winery is the first one visited by the characters portrayed by Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church, where Miles (Mr. Giamatti) praises its "top-notch pinot and chardonnay" by name in the script. The manager of the Sanford tasting room, Chris Burroughs, appears with them in a scene and even has a couple of lines.

"We cast the wines for this movie the way we would cast actors for this movie," said Michael London, the producer of "Sideways" in Los Angeles. "Every wine had a personality and an identity."

One night, "we had a fairly drunken evening of 'casting' at a dinner in Santa Barbara," he recalled, laughing. "It was like a casting couch."

Alexander Payne, who directed "Sideways" and wrote the script with Jim Taylor, "calls himself a 'location-driven filmmaker,' " Mr. London said, "and this was a location-driven movie, so it was important to him the wines on screen represent from a taste perspective" those for which the area is known by oenophiles.

Many wine brands, including Sanford, are featured because they are mentioned in the novel by Rex Pickett, "Sideways," on which the Payne-Taylor script is based. Some had to be "recast," as Mr. London put it, because they no longer matched their descriptions from the book or because the winery owners decided against participating in the movie.

One brand in "Sideways" is fake, Mr. London said, invented for a scene in which the characters visit the kind of soulless, corporate wine maker that Miles despises. The Fess Parker Winery was transformed for that scene, he added, into the "Frass Canyon" winery.

As for the origin of that imaginary brand, Mr. London traced it to a word used by an exterminator called by Mr. Payne to the rented house in which he lived during the filming. Frass is debris or droppings produced by insects.

So which nominee will win the imaginary Oscar for best product? As with all make-believe, you'll have to use your imagination.

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CLOROX The Clorox bleach brand sold by the Clorox Company is prominent in an early scene of "Million Dollar Baby" featuring two acting nominees, Clint Eastwood and Morgan Freeman. A Clorox bottle is visible among the products on Mr. Freeman's cart as he cleans the gym where Mr. Eastwood trains boxers. "Why do you buy that expensive stuff?" Mr. Eastwood asks Mr. Freeman. "Bleach is bleach." Mr. Freeman replies, "I like the way it smells."

A spokeswoman for Clorox in Oakland, Calif., Mary O'Connell, said the bottle's appearance was not a product placement but rather "a pleasant surprise" because the company knew nothing about it until she began receiving inquiries.

"It was just such a genuine moment," Ms. O'Connell said. "If you know about cleaning public places like gyms, it rang so true."

Ms. O'Connell offered a theory on how Clorox made it into "Million Dollar Baby": "Clint Eastwood went to Oakland Tech High School, which you can almost see from the Clorox offices."

HAI KARATE In "The Incredibles," Hai Karate, a mass-market men's fragrance introduced by **Pfizer** in 1966, makes the kind of comeback that consumed Norma Desmond in "Sunset Boulevard." A bottle of Hai Karate is visible as a character named Lucius (voiced by Samuel L. Jackson) prepares to resume his secret identity as the superhero Frozone.

Because Pixar Animation Studios, which released "The Incredibles" with Walt Disney Pictures, is known to eschew product placements, the inclusion of Hai Karate is likely a wink to older moviegoers from Brad Bird, the writer and director of "The Incredibles." The Web site Brandchannel.com, in its feature "Brand Cameo," describes Hai Karate's appearance as "an 'in-joke,' farcically looking back on the premetrosexual men's grooming market."

Hai Karate was introduced with a campaign by McCaffrey & McCall, a New York agency, that warned, "Be careful how you use it," playing on the era's go-go, secret agent, martial arts vibrations. By most accounts, Hai Karate was sold through the late 1970's or early 1980's.

KLEENEX The Kleenex tissue brand sold by the **Kimberly-Clark Corporation** turns up in many scenes near the end of "The Aviator," set in the 1940's, when Howard Hughes, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, began displaying symptoms of the obsessive-compulsive disorder that would eventually consume him.

A naked Hughes, fearful of germs, is shown surrounded by zillions of tissues along with scores of what look to be period Kleenex boxes, in their blue-and-white striped trade dress from the era.

The Kleenex role was not a product placement, said Dave Dickson, a spokesman for Kimberly-Clark in Irving, Tex., because the company "did not know about it" beforehand. Kimberly-Clark often provides replicas of vintage packages, he added, if requested by producers of movies and television shows.

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