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Wit and Wisdom of Super Bowl Ads

Deconstructing the Placement, Visuals, Message and Success of the Spots Is a Helpful Postgame Lesson

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...

As the French say, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (in English: The more things change, the more they stay the same).

The level of hype surrounding this year's Super Bowl advertising was pretty much as high as it has ever been and the postgame ad analysis was also brisk. Sites such as USA Today.com and Google Video even featured special sections where visitors could click and view all of the game's spots.

Also as usual, conversation about the spots centered on which ones were the best or worst. Popular attention seems to be most concerned with the entertainment value of the advertisements. But entertainment value is not the only interesting facet of spots served up on so noteworthy a stage. A closer look can shed some light on what the advertisers may have been attempting to accomplish with their presence in the big game.

Pregame

From a planning perspective, the interesting observation of the pregame show was Pizza Hut's sponsorship. Looking beyond the Jessica Simpson overload, it was interesting that the company was pushing its new Cheesy Bites Pizza far enough in advance of the start of the game that you could call in an order to Pizza Hut and have it before the game started.

A quick check of Pizza Hut's Web site revealed not only an offer for the chance to win a pair of Jessica Simpson-autographed boots but the ability to order food online. The strategy behind the placement was to make it easy for consumers to enjoy 28 cheese-filled bites. It will be interesting to see if Pizza Hut reports any results for pregame orders to get a sense of how well the idea worked. If not, one sure way to gauge success is to see whether it sponsors the pregame show next year.

Game Time

While its spots received few accolades for creativity, Diet Pepsi's presence did a good job of introducing consumers to a well-designed experience. The company's two units that ran within the game hammered home brand advantages. Diddy's presence and music are used to tell the product attribute story. Diet Pepsi is "brown and bubbly. You know you want it. Come and get you some."

In the second spot, Jackie Chan is used to deliver a product superiority jab at Diet Coke by positioning Diet Pepsi as the star and Diet Coke as the crushed stunt double. Tying the units together was a simple in-game billboard including the Web site brownandbubbly.com. Visitors to the Web site get a much deeper brand experience featuring outtakes, downloads, an opportunity to star in their own video and more.

A number of advertisers used the Super Bowl platform to introduce new brands, the largest "new product" category being films. Of the 58-plus in-game spots, eight films were featured, including "Cars," "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," "Mission: Impossible III" and "V for Vendetta." While not necessarily a new product, Dove's Self-Esteem Fund was an interesting entry into the Super Bowl environment. It was a substantive acknowledgement of the game's female viewing audience. My oldest daughter was captured by the spot. When I asked for her opinion, she thought it was cool. From my perspective, it was interesting enough to get me to check out campaignforrealbeauty.com.

Restaurants

In contrast to Pizza Hut's strategic pregame show presence, three restaurants ran spots during the game. Their goal was introduction and re-introduction. Outback Steakhouse took the opportunity to introduce its Victoria's Crown Filet, while Taco Bell re-introduced its Crunch Wrap Supreme. Burger King's re-introduction was on a whole different level, using an elaborate 60-second Broadway-like staging of the classic "Have It Your Way" tag line.

Beer

Anheuser-Busch once again makes the statement that it is the category leader, with multiple placements throughout the game. The company understands the game as an entertainment event that consumers look forward to and did its best to ensure consumers were entertained.

In so doing, Anheuser-Busch claims high ground. Its bevy of executions included something for everyone, from the comedy of the magic fridge, streaking sheep and Michelob Ultra Amber's touch football game to the little Clydesdale (humorous how some interpreted that spot as encouraging underage drinking).

It was also interesting to see a spot for herestobeer.com appear during the game. I wasn't sure if I remembered the name correctly, but when I went to the site, the ad kept playing over and over. And when you dig into the Beer Institute detail on the site, Anheuser-Busch comes up first on the member list. Convenient.

Veterans

With yet another year of Super Bowl presence under their belts, it's fair to say Careerbuilder.com, Ameriquest and Emerald Nuts are now veterans of Super Sunday. Their continuing presence in the big game is a key planning element designed to generate both big reach and public relations. Given this year's press, Ameriquest probably fared better than the other veterans on the PR front.

Nepotism

ABC Disney did not squander the opportunity the game provided to extend the family brandedness of its portfolio. It ran an interesting evolution of its "I'm Going to Disney World" campaign during the pregame show. There were also four non-television ads—three for movies and one for Disney World.

On the television side were ABC's promos for its own programming. Recognizing the game's broader viewing audience, the promo spots smartly didn't focus on plot specifics, but used other devices with wider appeal. Robert Palmer's tune altered to "Addicted to 'Lost'" was well edited and found its way to on-air billboards during "Good Morning America" in the days after the game. Shaquille O'Neal's standing at the free-throw line touting "Desperate Housewives" was a plug for both the show and NBA coverage.

In an almost Fox-like way, ABC did run a lot of promos for the postgame episode of "Grey's Anatomy." But at least the spots were well done. We were intrigued enough to stick with ABC to watch the episode.

Not to be forgotten are the units for ESPN. Like the units for "Lost" and "Desperate Housewives," the ESPN units recognized the opportunity to reach out to new viewers and not just run show and time slot promos.

Halftime Show

How did we get to a place where the NFL puts on the Rolling Stones as a safe bet for family-friendly entertainment? I asked that question during their set and my wife correctly pointed out that the Stones would be friendly for the family's parents. But still, they opened with "Start Me Up" and of course got bleeped three times. My 6-year-old daughter said it best when she asked, "Who's the old man singing?" I guess that's better than having her ask, "Who's the young woman with the wardrobe malfunction?" Unfortunately, I think Sprint was invisible as the halftime sponsor.

Postgame

Cadillac and its Escalade brand did a good job as the postgame sponsor. I remember thinking that the first in-game spot didn't fit, but that when I saw the second unit in the postgame, I felt better about it.

The postgame presence nicely linked Escalade to the MVP presentation, and captured the energy present at the end of the game when the champion Steelers were on the field. How can Cadillac not capture perceptual real estate as a champion when there's an Escalade parked on the field under wafting confetti?

So while it may be tempting to sit back and enjoy the cornucopia of spots that get served up in the Super Bowl, as a media planner it may also be valuable to look at them through a strategic lens. For brands that made the big investment, did it pay off? Were they able to accomplish what they set out to do? Taking a more critical view of brand presence in the Super Bowl could provide the insight you need to convince a client to take the big game plunge in the future.

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