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Advertising and American Pop Culture

April 21, 2008

How Ads Captivated a Nation During an Annual Football Game

The Super Bowl is unlike any other event in the world. While it is among the most anticipated and watched sporting events, its viewer-ship loyalty is simply unprecedented. The Super Bowl is viewed by hundreds of millions of people world wide, making it the obvious center stage for advertisers. As supported by Jerry Dell Femina, from the *Wall Street Journal*, “In my world - advertising - the Super Bowl is judgment day. If politicians have Election Day and Hollywood has the Oscars, advertising has the Super Bowl.”. However, how did the hype about this annual game begin? Who made the first “big plays” in the Super Bowl’s advertising game? And, of course, who was able to capitalize off the game and come out the ‘real’ champions of the Super Bowl? The historic road of the Super Bowl is a fascinating one, but there is absolutely no way you can separate the game from the ads that are placed on “Super Sunday” *that is*, the Super Bowl.

The first ‘Super Bowl’ ever played was not called the Super Bowl. The first ‘World Championship’ game was played in 1967 (Green Bay Packers vs. Kansas City Chiefs). The game was established when the N.F.L. (National Football League) and the A.F.L. (American Football League) merged in 1966 (instead of battling for the media’s attention). However, because this was a brand new event to all, the hype was nothing but a mere whisper, at least compared to every Super Bowl that followed it. ‘Super Bowl I’ was the only Super Bowl that did not sell out, leaving a remarkable 30,000 seats empty at the Los Angeles Coliseum, which

could seat 92,000 (and to think the tickets were only six to twelve dollars per seat!). The (not so) big game was aired on NBC and CBS, but strangely enough there are no tapes of the game at either network (only an audio track from NBC). The hype and competition for viewers was a huge issue between the networks, and it was in the hands of the advertisers to put one of them over the edge. A few of the earlier advertisers were Chrysler, Goodyear, American Airlines, RCA, RJ Reynolds Tobacco, and McDonald's. Many of the earlier advertisers targeted men, who were at the time, presumably the majority of the audience. For a commercial spot during Super Bowl I NBC asked for a mere \$75,000 for one minute, while CBS asked for \$85,000. The cost for a spot then is approximately 900 percent less in constant dollars than a spot sells for on a game nowadays (Kanner 14). In fact, CBS won the network battle through its intense promotion before the game and even promoted *that* on a full-page in the *New York Times* the next day. However, it is not all about bragging rights, but gaining the trust of more sponsors and advertisers for the next Super Bowl, due to their victorious network battle. By Super Bowl III (1969), advertisers were paying \$135,000 for a minute, which is still significantly cheaper than today (however the price will continue to steadily increase). The cost, however, did not hinder McDonald's from buying slots on both networks, increasing their store volume twenty-two percent, finally making them a contender in the fast food chain. Also, due to nation wide anti-smoking attitudes, a few tobacco companies quickly withdrew ads from the Super Bowl for good (eventually none would be seen in the Super Bowl).

By Super Bowl IV (1970), the nation was becoming steadily obsessed with the big game, but [still] not so much with the commercials. However, during Super Bowl VI (1972) a commercial finally cracked through the game's hype and made history. Coca-Cola made musical history with their diverse commercial, "Hilltop". Coca-Cola's commercial featured four

hundred young people of various cultures singing a merry and peaceful tune of the joy of Coca-Cola as a helicopter panned over them. “Hilltop”, which was filmed on a hilltop near Rome, cost the production of this sixty second spot \$225,000 (a large amount in those days). In fact, the ad was so successful it turned into a campaign that lasted for six years, spanning it to a total of forty versions! However, soon after the “Hilltop” campaign ended Coke began a new blockbuster with “Mean Joe Greene”, which turned out to be a pleasing success.

During Super Bowl XVIII (1984) a single commercial made a monumental and historical breakthrough. Apple paid \$1 million for the 60-second spot that ran just once - in the 1984 game (Kanner 25). The commercial “1984” was based on George Orwell’s science fiction, 1984. The Apple commercial was promoting the new Macintosh computer, but as strange as it may seem the product was never shown in the commercial. So how did “1984” attract \$4.5 million in sales within six hours of airing? It was simply a commercial you could not pass by when it aired during the Super Bowl. Created by Chiat/Day, “1984” was based on a totalitarian government headed by ‘Big Brother’ (a.k.a. “Big Blue” - IBM) and a young, vivacious, and strong woman (a.k.a. Apple - the fledgling company of IBM) attempting to free the mass of prisoners by shattering the screen of the brainwashing dictator, that *is* ‘Big Brother’, with a sledgehammer. Some of the semiotics of “1984” are the various scales of grey symbolizing the dull militaristic setting, the woman, wearing red shorts, symbolizing power (and sex), and the sledgehammer she uses to free the brainwashed mass symbolizes power as well. Due to this ground breaking commercial Apple had people lining up at their stores not even sure what they were getting ready to spend \$2,495 on! And to think, “Jobs worried about whether computer buyers actually watched the game.” (Kanner 28). Approximately 100 million viewers watched the Apple commercial and with in the first 100 days Apple sold 72,000 Macintoshes, exceeding Apple’s

goals by fifty percent (Kanner 28). Apple's "1984" commercial is known as single-handedly shattering through the clutter of the Super Bowl game, as well as helping advertisers gain a lot of attention during it. Now, thanks to "1984", the bar of advertising has been raised, to what seems to be an unsurpassable precedent.

However, Apple pressed their good fortune with "1984" and aired the 60-second commercial, "Lemmings" in the very next Super Bowl (1985). How could Apple expect to meet the expectations of their viewers who would have such high hopes for "Lemmings"? Well, Apple actually knew they probably would not have a "1984" reaction to "Lemmings", but they did not expect the complete upset and financial set back they found themselves faced with. Apple's "Lemmings", created by Chiat/Day promoted Macintosh Office. However, the commercial that cost \$900,000 to air just did not cut it. It showed men and women in uniform suits in a long line, falling off a cliff one by one. Many business people were offended by being called a lemming (small rodents who are known for dying in suicidal masses - myth), and Apple's sales surely reflected their anguish. After the huge loss, due to "Lemmings", "Apple shuttered three of six factories, cut twenty percent of its employees, and fired Chiat/Day and Jobs. And it steered clear of the Super Bowl until 1999 (Kanner 29)." Apple's "Lemmings" is known as one of the worse Super Bowl ads of all time.

As the Super Bowl continued to grow in popularity so did the advertisements and the prices. "By [Super Bowl] XX (1986), marketers regarded the Super Bowl as ad Mecca, the place where advertising should be super-exciting, super-dramatic, super-provocative, super-attention-getting, and super-creative (Kanner 33)." However, a huge contender in Super Bowl advertising in 1989 (and beyond) was Anheuser-Busch. Anheuser purchased six spots to launch the Bud Bowl (costing \$5 million), which definitely put them in the lead of the beer advertising

department. Their sales continued to raise. And now by the 1990s commercials with celebrities become a trend as ABC charges \$800,000 for a 30-second slot in Super Bowl XXV (1991). To name a few, Pepsi has Ray Charles playing the piano, Progressive Auto Insurance invested \$20 million (in 1999) using E.T. as a “safety ambassador” and Nike used Michael Jordan and Bugs Bunny to promote new sneakers as they play a basketball game. But commercials are not the only way advertising has been exploited in the Super Bowl. In some sense the technique of product placement has been implemented in the game. In Super Bowl XXIX (1995) many players wore nose strips regularly (and these Breathe Right strips were put on the market because of the NFL), especially the ones that seemed to score the touchdowns. By Super Bowl XXVIII (1993) forty-three of the fifty-six spots (at \$900,000 for 30 seconds) featured stars (Kanner 48). And the use of stars would be a common theme during the Super Bowl as Budweiser paid for more than eight minutes on Super Bowl XXXII (costing \$16.8 million) using Cedric ‘The Entertainer’ in one of their many slots.

Throughout the years of the Super Bowl there have been many exciting commercials. Whether they involve cars, fast food, beer, or movie trailers the viewers are some how captivated by it’s ‘larger than life’ persona. For example Frito-Lay, in the 1993 Super Bowl, became the first advertiser to sponsor a halftime show, which included a performance by Michael Jackson (Kanner 87). However, the Super Bowl can be a great start for a new company as well. In 1974, Master Lock paid \$107,000 to run an ad in Super Bowl VIII. The ad demonstrated the quality of Master Lock by having a sharpshooter fire a shot at it (which of course did not unlock it). Since 1974, Master Lock has made appearances in the Super Bowl until the company announced their retirement from the big game in 1997 (gaining more media attention than any commercial could have gave them). The Super Bowl is also known as a venue where sex sells, website

(a.k.a. dot com) ads once ruled, and animals make products easier to sell. According to Kanner, “Animals are fun to watch, and because of their innocence, we trust them. Advertisers often turn to them when they’ve nothing new to say and just want to catch your eye.” (142). To name a few commercials (in the Super Bowl) with animals, Geico has the clever gecko, Budweiser has the infamous frogs, and Coca-Cola has the adorable polar bears.

The Super Bowl has come a long and tremendous way to reach the fame and glory it has in the U.S. and across the world. From Super Bowl II, to the most recent, Super Bowl XLII, the game has become a holiday in itself, filled with thirty to sixty second endowments we know as *commercials*. In fact, the latest Super Bowl (SB XLII) was recorded by the Nielson [Media] Company as the most ever viewed Super Bowl (U.S.), with approximately 97.5 million viewers in the U.S. The most viewed commercial during Super Bowl XLII, seen by 103.7 million, was “Victoria’s Secret - Woman Holding Football” (www.Nielsen.com), proving that sex *still* does sell. The 2008 Super Bowl aired 50 minutes and 50 seconds of commercial time, totaling in 84 advertisements (www.Nielsen.com); meaning nearly an entire hour of ads were shown! Also, in this Super Bowl the category with the most minutes of exposure were automotives (5 ½ minutes), followed by motion pictures (4 ¼ minutes), and of course beer (4 minutes) finishing off the top three (www.Nielsen.com). Also speaking of beer, Anheuser-Busch purchased every slot in the beer category, making them the top advertiser of Super Bowl XLII.

Overall, the Super Bowl is not only the championship game for the respective divisional teams, but for the advertisers as well. Placing an ad in the Super Bowl takes three things: confidence, money, and creativity. As proven with Apple’s “Lemmings” ad, a Super Bowl commercial can make or break a company in the most significant way. The Super Bowl, like many of the ads that aired during it, were companies (teams) putting it all on the line during a

game. To segue on a final and metaphorical note, if the Super Bowl were a 'super' hero then the advertisements would be nothing short of a trusty sidekick (both on the prowl for more viewers).

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