

The Rules of Successful Super Bowl Ads

By Frank Luntz and Chris Kofinis

It's Super Bowl Sunday. America, are you ready for some ... commercials?

Now, most days of the year we all try to avoid commercials like the plague, but not during the Super Bowl. In a recent poll, almost 40 percent of American viewers said they tune in as much or more for the ads as for the game. When you have a projected audience of over 110 million viewers watching the big game, and others experiencing it through Twitter, Google, Facebook, the stakes for corporate America couldn't be higher.

Think of it this way: you have a massive audience but you only have 30 seconds to make a memorable impact, and it will often cost a million or more to produce and \$4.5 million to broadcast a single commercial. It's high risk ... but high reward. A great ad could mean an explosion of public buzz. But if your ad bombs, there's nowhere to hide.

What's more, memorability does not equal success. It's hardly helpful if people remember the cute kid in your ad but forget the product you're trying to sell. Worse yet, (and trust us, this happens), they think that cute kid is selling them your competitor's product. The most successful Super Bowl ads are more than about building brand - they are about strengthening reputation. Plenty of Super Bowl ads will get attention, but if they alienate your audience or fail to enhance confidence, credibility or trust, than that is one very costly mistake.

That begs the question: What makes a great super bowl ad? The answer: Follow eight rules.

The eight "Rules of Successful Super Bowl ads" below are research-tested and consumer-proven over 20 years of our work in the field. I (Frank) have also advised on more than a dozen of the most popular ad campaigns and tested close to 5,000 commercials over the last 20 years.

And, if you want to one of the first in America to find out which Super Bowl ads will be this year's winners and losers be sure to go to AOL.com on Sunday. We're going to be blogging instant reactions from our live focus group that will be dial testing every single commercial throughout the game starting at 6:30PM EST.

Until then, here's what matters most:

1. **The First Five Second Rule:** It's not three seconds or seven seconds. The decision comes precisely at the five-second mark. In that short time, the viewer is going to make a very powerful cognitive choice: watch or flee to the bathroom, grab a beer, or eat chips and dip. Those first five seconds must catch the eye and connect to the brain and/or heart. Great ads will grab you right away and make you want to watch them.
2. **The Last Three Second Rule** A great story needs a great ending. The best commercials close in a way that makes the ad permanently memorable and stimulates sustained interest. There has to be a final unexpected event that sears the ad deep into the brain. The best endings will elicit a strong emotional response - because you don't forget feelings. Make no mistake: an ad sans emotion is an ad sans effect.

3. Be Funny, Times Three: The most popular humorous Super Bowl ads embrace the rule of three laughs in 30 seconds. You have to get the first laugh in early so that viewers stay engaged. The second laugh sustains interest. But it's the third laugh that endures. It comes usually in the very last moments of an ad, and it either seals the deal or falls flat. A humorous and compelling close will render an ad truly memorable. Bud Light won year after year of Super Bowl "ad meter" awards because they faithfully followed this rule - and executed it to perfection.

4. Be Different, but Deliver: The very best ads turn the tables on the viewer in ways that are creative, compelling, and unexpected. The best spots must accomplish all this without being offensive or irritating. "Did you see that ad last night?" That is the day-after mark of definitive success — and it is a difficult needle to thread. The best recent example was 'Doritos Dog Collar,' a viewer favorite, because it delivered creativity that nobody saw coming. And I bet you still remember it now.

5. Focus on what they HEAR: Sound stimulates your mind, but in a great ad it serves as audible choreography for you mind. It will make you think of that commercial and that product above all others. Sometimes it's the background beat; sometimes it's the memorable song. The most powerful ads are those that effectively intertwine purposeful sound, complementing the visuals and helping them stand out like unseen exclamation marks. Consider Google's 2010 'Parisian Love' — an ad that used simple musical notes to creatively and quietly reinforce what makes Google's search engine so innovatively effective. Perfection!

6. Beware the Gimmick: There was brilliance in an old lady bellowing, "Where's the Beef?", but most ads fail to reach these heights. In reality, the advertising hall of shame is littered with lousy gimmick ads that backfired -- badly. The worst of the worst are celebrities. Remember the Kim Kardashian ad from 2011 or the Donald Trump ad from last year's Super Bowl? The company? The product? Probably not. Why? Because they lacked any creative purpose. Smart gimmick ads win over the audience, the bad ones lose them. Remember, different — for the simple sake of being different — is not enough.

7. Go for the Heart: Many make the mistake of assuming an emotional ad can't stand out during the Super Bowl. In fact, some of the highest scoring ads -- and the most difficult to execute — are those that touch the heart of America. The most powerful example in recent history? The Budweiser ad wherein Clydesdales, without human direction, gracefully traverse an unknown path and, upon sight of lower Manhattan and Ground Zero, solemnly bow. The most amazing aspect of the ad? It was virtually silent. Images connect in ways that words cannot.

8. Don't Divide the Room: Some ad firms -- and companies -- woefully forget that women watch the Super Bowl, too. Sexual innuendo and skimpy-dressed models ... it may work with guys, but 46% of Super Bowl viewers (females) may recoil. Run an ad that offends women -- or anyone, for that matter -- and the alienation effect can actually detract from your image and your reputation. You cannot connect with the entire viewing population if, in the process, your company offends half of it. And yes, we're talking to you, GoDaddy.

A final thought ...

Companies and advertising agencies should keep this important point mind before they spend millions on a next year's Super Bowl ad. The Super Bowl is not a day to focus on information. It's about smart creative entertainment and making consumers connect emotionally. It's also about your reputation — how you connect with customers, not what you sell them. To make a great ad that truly stands out, it doesn't need to be complicated or expensive. Some of the best aren't. It just needs to make people laugh, cheer, or -- in those very special cases — cry. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's an ad for the ages

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What percent of viewers tune as much or more for the ad broadcast during the Super Bowl?

How many total viewers are estimated for the Super Bowl?

How much will a 30 second ad cost this year?

List and describe the 8 rules of successful Super Bowl Ads

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Super Bowl Advertising Research

Go online and research a past Super Bowl ad that you find appealing. Analyze the ad using the 8 steps described in the article.

Product/Company Advertised _____

Description of the Advertisement

Year the ad was originally broadcast _____

Explain why the ad appealed to you _____

Identify which of the 8 rules this advertisement successfully follows. Explain why you feel they were successful _____

In your own opinion what do you think makes a successful Super Bowl ad?
