

Superbowl Advertising Review: 2005

By Tim Calkins

The Superbowl is the single biggest marketing event of the year. No other event gets as much attention from advertisers and consumers. It is also the most expensive marketing event of the year. This year each thirty second spot sold for approximately \$2.4 million. This is quite a bit of money.

For marketers, the Superbowl is a unique opportunity, because it is the only time an advertiser can reach the entire US population all at once. Ninety million people watch the Superbowl, almost 1/3 of the US population. The next biggest media event, the Oscars, reaches about forty million people. Big shows such as the Apprentice finale reach less than twenty million people. In an era of media fragmentation, the Superbowl remains a unique event, one that has grown its audience as all events have seen audiences slip.

The enormous reach makes the Superbowl an opportunity for marketers to shine. It also makes the Superbowl an opportunity for marketers to both waste money and damage their brands.

To be successful, a Superbowl ad needs to do four things. First, it has to break-through so people notice the ad. Second, it has to be well branded. The product has to be clear. Third, there has to be a benefit. Ultimately advertising has to drive sales, and sales come from benefits. Fourth, the spot has to be likable; advertising research consistently indicates that ads people like have greater impact on sales than ads people don't like.

What follows is my review of the 2005 Superbowl advertisements. I first present the best (As) then the runner ups (Bs) and then the misses (Ds). I end with observations on a few other notable ads.

The Best: A

1. Toyota Prius

Toyota ran just one ad in the Superbowl. It was a good one. As a result, Toyota gets an A. The Toyota ad was creatively arresting, immediately drawing you into the ad. The payoff, that Prius is the first big break-through in transportation in many years, is a very big but credible claim. Branding is strong, the benefit is clear and the spot is likable.

2. Pepsi and Diet Pepsi

Pepsi ran four different spots during the first half, two for Diet Pepsi and two for the Pepsi-iTunes promotion. All four of the spots worked well...they attracted attention, delivered a benefit, were well branded and were likable.

The Pepsi truck ad was perhaps the funniest of the bunch. The only problem with that spot is that the focus is more on the truck than the soft drink, and Pepsi still makes its money from sales of soft drinks.

The Pepsi-iTunes promotion is a great program for both Pepsi and Apple, and the ads clearly deliver the news about the program. Pepsi is smart to leverage a high-profile promotion in its Superbowl advertising, because it makes a direct link to sales.

3. Tabasco

This ad is clean and simple. It grabs your attention, is strongly branded, is likeable, and delivers a benefit...hot. The spot isn't as good as Tabasco's last Superbowl ad, from seven years ago (the exploding mosquito), but the ad certainly breaks-through and delivers a benefit.

4. Emerald Nuts

Emerald Nuts did a good job of delivering a simple message with their Superbowl ad. I was immensely skeptical of the spot going into the Superbowl, but I thought the ad worked well.

5. Mastercard

This is a charming spot for Mastercard, clearly delivering the benefit that the card is accepted at grocery stores. Attention, benefit, branding and likeability are all there.

The Runner Ups: B

1. Fed Ex

This is a smart, funny commercial. FedEx rolled out the 10 things that a commercial needs to be a success at the Superbowl...a celebrity, an animal, a groin kick, etc. This could have been an effective spot, too, but the most important thing, a reason to use the product, was essentially absent. As an instructional video on doing Superbowl advertising this spot works great. As a vehicle to drive sales the spot disappoints.

2. Budweiser

The good people in St. Louis invest more in the Superbowl than any other company. In total, Budweiser had 10 different spots. This is an investment of about \$24 million. In addition, Budweiser produced 20 different commercials for the Superbowl, and each one probably cost about \$500,000. So in total Budweiser is in \$34 million.

The result? A mixed bag. Budweiser ran perhaps the best spot on the Superbowl this year, the parachuting spot for Bud Light. It grabbed your attention, delivered a benefit, had good branding and was simply charming. The other spots were mixed.

Budweiser's military tribute ad worked surprisingly well; the epic music, combined with powerful visuals, made a simple and elegant statement without appearing commercial. It was nicely done.

Budweiser Select was a puzzling ad for a puzzling product. The core benefit of Budweiser Select, apparently, is no aftertaste. The group I was with never knew that aftertaste was a problem with beer, so it looks a bit like Budweiser is calling attention to a problem that many people aren't aware of. This seems like a dangerous road to be on. Apparently Select is a

low carb beer, but Bud isn't launching it as a low carb beer. Which I don't entirely understand, but there you are.

3. CareerBuilder.com

CareerBuilder ran three spots in the Superbowl. The company played FedEx's #1 key to Superbowl success by rolling out a troop of monkeys. The spots were funny and clever. Lost, however, was the important message that CareerBuilder is the largest on-line job website. Who knew? It is disappointing that this rather interesting and powerful fact was hidden.

4. CibaVision

This ad got the point across: a new contact lens that transmits more oxygen. Mission accomplished. Nonetheless, it still was a little lacking for me. Why, precisely, should I use this product? More oxygen, sure, I get that. Why do I need more oxygen for my eyes? They have been fine for years. I get an attribute but not a benefit. To an extent this brand was in a tough situation, forced to communicate a complicated new product while breaking through creatively. They didn't quite get there.

5. Olympus

It took me a while to get this spot, but eventually I did. Olympus is rolling out a new product, one that is a camera and a digital music player combined. The message comes across for me after the second spot. Unanswered, however, is a simple question: who needs a digital music player in their camera? This feels like a Field of Dreams technology to me...if you build it, they will come. If you can combine a camera and a digital music player they will buy it. Perhaps. If you combine a calculator and a running shoe people might buy it, too. But I doubt it.

The Misses: D

1. Degree

Let us salute Degree for taking a risk. Unilever put a rather polarizing ad for Degree on the Superbowl, investing big bucks in an effort to distinguish their brand. And let us also express our amazement with this weak effort. The benefit is completely lacking, the execution is sophomoric. The spot is poor in branding, benefit and likeability. This is why not all risks are worth taking.

2. Silestone

The troop of Chicago sports heroes of days gone by clearly makes the point: "I am Diana Pearl." Mike Ditka states it, Dennis Rodman states it. The spot certainly delivers this message, and in a break-through way. Now, who or what is Diana Pearl and why do we care? These are good questions, I think, and left unanswered. And how will this ad help the brand, Silestone? This is another good question, and I'll answer it: it doesn't.

3. MBNA

Let us assume for a moment that I got the message of this ad, that MBNA offers lots of affinity credit cards. I am now going to do...well, what? How does telling me this help MBNA's business? Should I look for the rugby credit card? Look for a card related to something I am interested in? I have no idea. It is an irrelevant piece of data. Best case this ad is irrelevant, worst case it is just a mess.

4. Bubblicious

I just didn't understand this ad at all.

5. GoDaddy.com

GoDaddy did a few things exceptionally well during the Superbowl: the company attracted attention and received strong branding. Millions of people today know GoDaddy exists, when two days ago they did not. If you ask someone on the street if they know GoDaddy, they will probably say yes.

However, one of the great lessons of the dot com debacle is that awareness isn't enough; you have to give people a benefit. And the benefit is missing in this spot. Indeed, it is hard to determine what the company actually does.

If you did really focus and pick up on the benefit, cheap domain name registrations, you still have to conclude that this initiative is troubled; offering cheap domain registrations is not going to build a strong long term brand. The competition just has to beat the price to destroy the positioning.

Other Notable Advertisers

-Cadillac: I thought this spot, of a car shooting out of a tunnel, was catchy and benefit focused. 0 to 60 in 5 seconds. Clear, compelling, sharp. Still, there was something in the ad that kept it out of the top group. Maybe it was the Cadillac.

-McDonalds: Very, very strange. I get it, and I see how McDonalds is trying to tap into our shared McDonalds experience. But I'm not sure what in this ad would make me want to eat at McDonalds.

-Subway: The most notable thing about this spot was the dramatic strategic change for Subway. Gone was Jared, gone was the health appeal. Instead we have a cheddar, bacon, beef sandwich, or something like that, which looks really good and probably has enough fat to last you for a month. Jared would not approve.

-Ameriquest: One of the funniest spots on the Superbowl was the Ameriquest ad featuring the man, the cat and the knife. Track this one down if you haven't seen it. The ad delivers the benefit that Ameriquest doesn't judge too quickly. Why this matters, however, is unclear to me. Are we supposed to call Ameriquest directly for a mortgage? Don't we usually go to a bank or broker for a mortgage? Is the fact they don't judge too quickly mean they are more likely to

approve our mortgage application? Or that they are more likely to turn down our mortgage because they are going to study it at length? I am a bit lost.

-Staples: This ad promises that Staples will make your life easy. Completely missing, however, is any hint at how Staples will do this, or how Staples does it better than the local office supply place or than those two ever so distinctive brands, Office Max and Office Depot. Branding was weak, too. This one almost made the D list.

-Volvo: This ad is a good lesson in positioning. When you have a brand that means safety, focusing on power and rides to the moon seems like a big disconnect.