

## Advertising Lessons from the Super Bowl

**Whether you pay \$200 or \$2 million for an ad, don't expect it to perform miracles. Here's what advertisers can learn from the big game's contenders**

by [Steve McKee](#)

No doubt the Indianapolis Colts are planning to use their experiences next year to repeat as champions and the Chicago Bears—though still smarting—are already applying lessons from this year's pain to next year's plan.

Win or lose, the Super Bowl is a learning experience—not only for the teams that play in it but for every student of the game. It's the grandest stage and the biggest day of the year for football. But it's advertising's biggest day as well, and just like football fans, advertisers large and small can learn from the triumphs and tragedies of those who have taken the field.

Each year, my company sponsors ADBOWL, a Web site where consumers can rate the Super Bowl ads in real time. Over the years, we've learned a lot by witnessing which ads perform well and which fall flat. Whether or not your company will ever be in a position to advertise during the big game, there are some valuable lessons you can learn from Super Bowl success stories (see [BusinessWeek.com, 2/5/07, "Super Bowl Ads Go Amateur"](#)).

### Affection for the Brand

Understand the context. One of the best-selling books of all time, *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren (Zondervan Publishing, 2002), starts with a bold, declarative sentence: "It's not about you." This is a lesson more companies should learn. Super Bowl advertisers know that tens of millions of people eagerly anticipate their commercials and don't want to sit through annoying speeches telling them how great a product or service is.

It's perhaps odd that an advertiser—who is, after all, trying to sell something—would be expected to restrain its sales impulses. But the first rule of selling anything is to know your audience. There's a time to ask for the order and there's a time to build relationships.

That's perhaps why, year after year, Budweiser and Bud Light walk away with the ADBOWL crown. The marketers at Anheuser-Busch ([BUD](#)) know that people watch the Super Bowl to have a good time, and that their desire for entertainment doesn't pause at the commercial breaks. Any given Bud spot may not make you want to buy a beer, but no brand-building advertising works that way. What a well-executed commercial will do is create affection for a brand, and over time, that affection will pay off in increased sales. Anheuser-Busch wouldn't have spent over \$250 million in the Super Bowl over the past two decades if it didn't.

### Thirty-Second Story

Respect your audience. When people talk about the greatest Super Bowl ads of all time they tend to reach back into history, citing the simple, stunning visual of a bullet ripping through a Master Lock ([FO](#)) in slow motion, or Mean Joe Green being not-so-mean to the kid in the tunnel in the Coke ([KO](#)) ad. Most often mentioned is Apple's ([AAPL](#)) breakthrough spot named for the year (and literary reference) it represented: 1984. One reason people remember these ads so fondly is simple nostalgia...expectations weren't quite so high back then.

But these commercials also share a common characteristic: They respected their audience. In today's age of GoDaddy.com and Flomax (two of the advertisers that underperformed in ADBOWL) it's hard to believe that at one time an advertiser could have expected its audience to understand an allusion to a work of literature. But expect it they did, and it paid off for everyone. Sure, it's O.K. to have fun with your advertising, but appealing to people's baser instincts doesn't reflect well on your company. Be smart, and smart people will respond.

Tell a story. Blockbuster ([BBI](#)) ads are like blockbuster movies, only shorter. Both have a plot, character development, and often a twist at the end. Hard to do in a 30-second spot? Sure, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

Coca-Cola scored points this year with an imaginative look at what happens inside a Coke machine between when the coins go in and the bottle comes out. GM ([GM](#)) also took a storytelling approach, bringing to life a factory-floor robot in a charming way. Both spots were captivating. And both spots worked.

## Something to Enjoy

Remember the big picture. Every ad you create should in some way stand on its own, but no commercial exists in a vacuum. In the continuing conversation in which you engage with your audience, each execution represents just a single sentence. King Pharmaceuticals ([KG](#)) ran a commercial this year that didn't mention its brand or its product. All it was meant to do was encourage people to visit [BeatYourRisk.com](#), a site the company sponsored.

It was a daring move that will likely pay off for them in the coming weeks and months, just as it did for Reebok with their *Terry Tate, Office Linebacker* spot a few years ago. Not only did that spot score well in ADBOWL, it scored huge traffic at Reebok's ([RBK](#)) Web site.

Whether you pay \$200 or \$2 million for an ad, don't expect it to do more than it can. Think first about who you're trying to reach and what they're looking for as they watch TV, read the newspaper, or surf the Web. Then find a way to meet them where they are with a refreshing, respectful, and timely message. Make your ads something that they welcome into their world rather than something they avoid. You—and they—will be glad you did.