



The Multimillion-Dollar Super Bowl Gamble

Ultra-expensive Super Bowl ads can be a huge gamble. But for these businesses, the gamble paid off with breakthrough ads that changed their companies' future.

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It's competitive. It's risky. And it's tough. The stakes will be high this Sunday from the moment the anthem is sung at Super Bowl 41--and I'm not talking about the game being played between the Colts and the Bears. I'm referring to the game of advertising being played by the 20-plus companies vying for the title of "Super Bowl's Big Breakthrough Ad."

These companies are all willing to spend top dollar for the chance to wow an international audience. This year, CBS is reportedly charging at least \$2.6 million for a 30-second spot, up from \$2.5 million last year. And let's not forget what it costs to actually make the ad, which in some cases means putting out another \$1 million in production costs. But with an expected audience of about 90 million viewers tuning in for the big game, advertisers know this could be their best chance to get noticed on a global scale, even if it means spending a shocking \$87,000 per second.

Sounds like a risky venture, doesn't it? It is. Of all the ads televised each year, how many companies truly come out of the Super Bowl with a financial advantage? Sure, there's always a few memorable spots discussed at the water cooler the next day, but the majority of ads aren't good for much more than a brief laugh and are easily forgotten by Monday morning.

But what about the companies that *have* succeeded--the company's whose ads are still being talked about more than 20 years after they first aired. What did they have that the others didn't? Professor Bruce Vanden Bergh, former chair of Michigan State University's Department of Advertising, Public Relations and Retailing, says it's really all about creativity: Who will dare to be different and still be lucky enough to strike a chord with viewers?

So which ads have stood the test of time and memory? Let's start with the very ad that raised the bar on creativity. In fact, after 23 years, it's still being called one of the best Super Bowl ads *ever*. The ad themed around George Orwell's novel, *1984*, skyrocketed Apple Computer's new Macintosh to mega-success back in 1984. Professor Vanden Bergh says that Apple's "1984" ad marked the end of traditional Super Bowl commercials and marketing, and introduced a new, creative, challenging element to ad-making that millions of Americans look forward to critiquing every year.

- **Ad Title:** "1984" (released in 1984)
- **Company:** Apple Computer
- **Ad Rate:** \$500,000 for a one-minute slot
- **What It Was All About:** In this classic commercial, director Ridley Scott helped Apple introduce its Macintosh computer to viewers worldwide by creating a cinematic experience in which Apple's new, easier-to-use Macintosh was being compared to IBM's traditional, somewhat boring and more difficult-to-use machine. The ad begins by flashing back between a large video screen featuring a Big Brother-type character (symbolic of IBM) speaking to a group of drones mesmerized by his words, and a young runner jogging into the room (symbolic of Macintosh). Though authorities are chasing the runner, she quickly swings a sledgehammer at the screen and destroys it. Then these words creep onto the screen and are read by a voice: "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984'."
- **Why It Succeeded:** Steve McKee, president of ad agency McKee Wallwork Cleveland, which runs the annual ADBOWL rating site, says that even though the idea behind the ad was rather simple, it was well produced and took a significant risk. The ad assumed its audience would understand the literary reference--which it did. And the audience liked the company's assumption that they'd know George Orwell's famous book. McKee says an audience appreciates being given credit for their intelligence, an element he says commercials today are lacking.
- **Watch It Now:** <http://youtube.com/watch?v=R706isyDrqI>

Another ad that still has a lock on the public's "recall factor" is one that was developed by Master Lock in 1974. Though it didn't have quite the same impact as Apple's "1984," its simple visual message was enough to make audience members take notice and help make Master Lock one of the most trusted lock companies for years to come. Today, Master Lock is the U.S. market share leader when it comes to padlock sales (it's the world's largest padlock manufacturer).

- **Ad Title:** "Marksman" (released in 1974)

- **Company:** Master Lock
- **Ad Rate:** \$107,000 for a 30-second spot
- **What It Was All About:** Master Lock aimed to demonstrate the durability of its product by having a sharpshooter shoot at one of their locks. A close-up of the padlock showed that despite being fired at by a high-powered rifle, the lock could withstand the force.
- **Why It Succeeded:** Ads don't get much simpler than this. Just like Apple's spot, Master Lock's commercial had a basic premise mixed with powerful, memorable imagery. Just how memorable? The ad ran, with only slight variations, during the next 21 Super Bowls...and the lock never did break.
- **Watch It Now:** <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4097253/>

Though both the Apple and Master Lock spots are recognized as breakthrough ads of their time, the competition has only gotten fiercer as technology continues progressing. In order to stand out, the commercials of today have to kick it up a notch and think outside the box in order to get noticed.