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Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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SUPER BOWL OR DUST BOWL?

“It’s not creative unless it sells.”

Bill Bernbach

Another Super Bowl, XLI to be exact, has come and gone. Typical of Super Bowls both a media trying to make news and armchair quarterbacks are talking about the advertainment aired during this latest fete. Who had the best ad? Certainly, the sponsors want and like that nearly everyone is talking about their commercials since it generates free GRPS. And they have paid a bundle for each 30-second spot ranging from about \$2 – 2.6 million dollars. It’s a way to stretch the impressions and, as such, their costs. And that can’t be bad! Or can it?

It depends “what” everyone is talking about. It’s about “what” those free GRPS are doing and whether that is “what” the advertiser hopes to gain from the commercial messaging. As the saying goes, “talk is cheap.” “What” really counts is action. More specifically, the real value of the advertising is converting those media or word-of-mouth GRPS to customer penetration, switching, larger transactions, trade-up, more frequent purchasing – or what we know to be the Marketing Objective. Or the value could come from fulfilling some other objective such as increasing distribution or quality of distribution of your product, stimulating merchandising (in the form of discount pricing or display) support at retail, motivating distributors or sales personnel to sell against the event – or what we know to be Sales Objectives. Driving these actions is ultimately evidenced by an increase in sales or, stated another way, ringing the cash register. Now that’s a Super Bowl for the advertisers.

On the other hand, if what everyone is talking about (like which commercial they liked the best or thought to be the most entertaining) has not had an impact on sales (i.e., sell-in, movement as in sales velocity, or future streams of sales) it is not a Super Bowl for the sponsors. Not at the cost they paid for each commercial message. That’s a Dust Bowl! It will cause marketing support dollars to dry-up adversely impacting sales growth potential and even undermine management confidence in the marketers and their advertising agencies.

What’s the difference whether a “specific commercial” has enjoyed a Super or Dust Bowl beyond the Sales Objectives that are generated by the hype of the event? There are a few important pre-requisites the must be satisfied.

BOATS & HELICOPTERS:

- 1. It has to be an appropriate vehicle for the target and product or brand** – For example, despite the fact that about one-half the viewing audience for the Super Bowl is

female does not mean that products targeted to the fairer gender will fare well on the Super Bowl. Importantly, a more significant question is whether the ROI from the Super Bowl will be higher for this versus an alternate vehicle such as Oprah or Grey's Anatomy. The context of the Super Bowl is, well, "manly" man. The theme is hard-hitting American football. As such the character and/or theme may not be appropriate for products directed at the feminine half, feminine in character or in any way inconsistent with the theme.

Additionally, one should consider other aspects of the product such as the purchase cycle, margins, lifetime value of the viewer, etc. Are viewers in the purchase cycle when the advertising is aired? The longer and further away the reception of the message is from the purchase cycle the less likely it will convert to sales. Also, is the lifetime value of the target audience for the product likely to contribute to paying out the investment and contribute to profitable growth? If so, then the Super Bowl may be a relevant vehicle. If not, find something else.

Consider, too, that the product or service needs to be one in which prospective customers can access easily either via the Internet, a convenient phone call or a quick trip to a local retail outlet. In other words it should be a product or service for which people can satisfy the call, or suggestion, to action through access or ubiquity (e.g., we couldn't imagine a drive without seeing a McDonald's or being out of reach of a Coke).

Another important consideration for the Super Bowl as a vehicle for the commercial message relates to alternate constituencies, beyond the consumer, that may be influenced by the placement of the advertising. Sales personnel, distributors and retailers fall into this category. Can they be engaged to act in a way that will have a positive impact on brand sales? For example, might the retailer be influenced by the prospect of increased sales that it leads to merchandising support, which, in turn, creates a self-fulfilling prophecy? That's a good place to be.

- 2. The commercial spot needs to be up to the task** – The competition for the attention of the consumer is fierce particularly since it is estimated that we are bombarded by more than 2000 messages in a given day. The environment of the Super Bowl raises the intensity to another level. Products, brands and companies are vying for the customer's attention through the creation of "advertainment." This is evidenced by sometimes outrageous situations, scantily clad women, cutting-edge special effects, scantily clad women, sophomoric humor, scantily clad women, heart rendering salutes, scantily clad women, etc. The advertising must have something special about it to be able to cut through the clutter and hyperbole, engage the customer, register the brand and its benefit(s), and stimulate the achievement of the Marketing Objective. In other words the sponsor needs to have leadership advertising.

Leadership advertising needs to satisfy a number of criteria. Generating action (which is about stimulating behavior that leads to sales), beyond one's expectations, is the most important one. In order to achieve this the advertising must cover the basics of effective communications. The Super Bowl ads must: a) be *persuasive*; b) have strong *strategic communication*; and 3) have *impact* in the medium. If you don't have all three of these

basics the advertising is not likely to be successful in building sales regardless of the specific vehicle. It becomes even more daunting at the Super Bowl.

Persuasion is influenced by the strategic message. Does the brand or product being advertised offer a relevant, meaningfully differentiated benefit to the target? If not, the advertising is off on the wrong foot. In the competitive environment of the Super Bowl this could spell disaster.

Favorable strategic communication is a function of an idea – what we refer to as the Campaign Idea. The Campaign Idea communicates the relevant, meaningfully differentiated benefit in provocative customer language through the integration of a creative concept coupled with a set of key copy words (what some people incorrectly refer to as the “slogan”) and a core dramatization. The idea needs to be BIG to breakout from the pack in the Super Bowl. Also, as mentioned all three components of the idea need to work together in communicating a single-minded message. No single-minded message then one fails to favorably register strong strategic communication.

The final part is all about execution. That’s the impact part. How well does the execution showcase the Campaign Idea? Will it capture the targets’ attention, engage them in staying with the spot and register strong brand linkage such that consumers remember the brand and its benefit. If the only thing consumers are talking about is related to impact (e.g., how much they “liked” the commercial spot) and not the benefit and/or idea, then it is less likely for that ad to achieve the behavior (i.e., action) being sought by the advertiser.

- 3. It can be leveraged if it is part of a campaign** – In this case we are not just talking about longevity but the ability to simultaneously execute it in alternate mediums. These mediums might include outdoor vehicles, retail promotions, Internet, special events, PR – and the list is limited only by the strength of the idea and the imagination of the marketer. If the advertising is not campaignable, or employed in a campaign, it’s nothing more than a one shot deal – a very expensive one at that too! Something that is only around for 30-seconds is akin to highly perishable produce. It has a very short life (unless you happen to be Apple “1984” where the “talk value” was so great the spot still lives more than 20-years later). The advertising that enjoys “Super” Bowl returns will more likely be part of an integrated (and, maybe even, long running successful) campaign customized for the even.

Super Bowl or Dust Bowl? How do the ads people are talking about meet the aforementioned pre-requisites? Chances are that if they do then they have enjoyed a Super Bowl. You can too regardless of the vehicle your ads appear in if they satisfy the important pre-requisites.

Richard Czerniawski & Mike Maloney

Richard Czerniawski

.....
430 Abbotsford Road
Kenilworth, Illinois 60043
tel 847.256.8820
fax 847.256.8847

Mike Maloney

.....
1506 West 13th Street, #17
Austin, Texas 78703
tel 512.236.0971
fax 512.236.0972

.....
Reply to Richard:

rdczerniawski@cs.com or
richardcz@bdn-intl.com

.....
reply to Mike:

mikewmaloney@cs.com or
mikemaloney@bdn-intl.com

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Our next Open Strategic Positioning & Communications College has been scheduled for May 1-3, 2007 at the Hotel Orrington in Evanston, Illinois. For more information call Lori Vandervoort at 800-255-9831 (620-431-0780)

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