

Super Bowl ads will reflect tough economy, says advertising professor

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Fewer cars. More horses. A softer sell. That's just part of what viewers can expect in Sunday's "Super Bowl of advertising," as companies adjust their marketing in a very down market, says Jan Slater, a branding expert and the head of the department of advertising at the University of Illinois.

Even in that down market, it still makes good business sense for many companies to spend the \$3 million for a 30-second spot, an increase from last year, Slater said. "Even though it's really expensive, it's still the largest mass audience you can buy. If you want that group of consumers, if you want to reach a lot of people ... this may be the best place to be right now."

For the first time in many years, however, American car companies will not run spots during the Super Bowl, Slater said. The game has always been an ideal place for selling new models to a largely male audience, but avoiding the game this year is "in their best interest," she said.

"Everybody would want to know why are you spending that \$3 million when you're getting all this money from the government," Slater said.

Anheuser-Busch, on the other hand, is smart to continue its prominent role in the advertising showcase, Slater said. With its takeover last year by the Belgian company InBev, the brewer needs to reinforce the all-American image of its Budweiser beers, she said.

“With what Budweiser has been through this year, if they had said we’re not going to advertise in the Super Bowl, that would have hurt that brand a lot,” she said.

The company’s iconic Clydesdales will feature prominently in its spots, she said, because the horses “are kind of warm and fuzzy, very traditional, and kind of recapture the idea of this big American brand.”

Don’t expect a lot of hard sells in this year’s ads, Slater said. Instead, expect messages that say, “We understand you’re hurting, we understand it’s a tough time.” To be effective, ads will need to show relevance for consumers and their situation, and not just sell the product, she said.

One of the best examples of that approach may be that of Hyundai, one of only two carmakers buying spots. In them, the company is expected to highlight a program through which car buyers can return their vehicles if they lose their jobs.

Among the ads Slater will be the most curious to see, given the current environment, will be those of the job-search Web sites Monster.com and CareerBuilder.com. People will be wondering “are there jobs to find,” she said. Likewise, she’s curious about E*Trade, the online investment site, given the beating the stock market has taken.

Advertising usually declines during a recession, Slater said, because advertising dollars are traditionally determined as a percentage of sales profits. In many cases, however, that may be shortsighted, she said. “There’s this debate of what you can afford to spend and what you need to spend, and sometimes those are the same and sometimes they’re at odds.”

When asked how companies can afford expensive ads like those in the Super Bowl, Slater said the question for many of those companies is

“how can they afford not to? They are still in competitive marketplaces, they are still trying to sell their brands.”

Every brand has equity, and maintaining that equity even in tough times can be important, Slater said. Associating one’s brand with a strong brand like the Super Bowl can add to that value, she said.

Separate from the Super Bowl, companies often may need to increase advertising during declining sales just to “stop the bleeding,” Slater said. If advertising always declines with sales, a business risks becoming less and less visible in the marketplace, “and sometimes you get yourself into a hole you can’t dig yourself out of.”

Even though she believes Ford, GM and Chrysler are wise to be avoiding the Super Bowl, Slater said advertising will be key to any strategy in turning their fortunes around.

“There’s no amount of money” that can change people’s perceptions right now, given the beating the carmakers took on Capitol Hill, she said. Advertising will be key, however, in making the public aware of new products and new ways of doing business, and to bring them to showrooms and Web sites for first-hand experience.

“The old adage in advertising is it’s easier to change your product than it is to change the mind of the consumer.”

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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