

Business

Super or Stupid?; At \$2.7 million, Super Bowl ads are recession-proof, but to some firms, they are costly, ineffective vanity projects. But for others, Chris Cobb finds, they're just the ticket

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They are super-expensive and super-risky, but at record prices in a slumping economy, Super Bowl commercials are hotter than ever.

This year, U.S. advertisers will pay \$2.7 million for a 30-second Super Bowl spot, plus the usual astronomical production costs to deliver commercials that will be goofy or distinctive enough to start a positive post-game buzz.

Super Bowl commercials are recession-proof, and in a year in which the Hollywood writers' strike has killed or damaged other big-ticket events such as the Academy and Emmy awards and winter TV launches, the 2008 edition has become an even more valuable platform for deep-pocketed business to hawk their products.

"It's one big drunken holiday," said New York author and marketing specialist Mark Stevens. "If they made the price \$5 million for 30 seconds, it would still have sold out. If next year they wanted to sell the whole show to one advertiser they would have a lineup of bidders."

Super Bowl skeptic Mr. Stevens says it's mostly money well wasted.

"We call it the 'Stupid Bowl' at my firm," he says.

"We believe in advertising, but Super Bowl is the day when the business community loses its senses.

"The networks tell you that 90 million or more will be watching, but all the statistics around the Super Bowl are exaggerated."

Bob Parsons, CEO and founder of the traditionally titillating Super Bowl advertiser and Internet domain vendor GoDaddy.com, disagrees.

"We'll have 93 million viewers in the U.S. alone," he said, "and 60 per cent of them will be male and the vast majority of those will be in the 21-to-54 age range. It's the prime marketing target and a group that's almost impossible to find all together, and paying attention, in any other medium."

In what many strongly suspect is a contrived effort to get attention, GoDaddy submitted a racy commercial to Super Bowl host network Fox and despite several attempts at revision, Fox rejected it.

So GoDaddy's Super Bowl commercial will be a commercial for its rejected commercial. Viewers will have to visit GoDaddy.com to see it.

"We do outrageous, in-your-face commercials," said Mr. Parsons. "Ours is edgy enough to offend some and to make others take notice. That's the point. We want to make a lot of noise and be noticed."

Mr. Parsons is convinced that the Super Bowl is good value.

"When I ran my first (Super Bowl) commercial," he said, "I had a 16-per-cent market share and the week after Super Bowl it was 25 per cent. When I ran my second commercial a year later, my market share was 32 per cent and it rose to 38. Now I'm at 42 per cent. I don't care what the commercial looks like, I care about business. I can draw direct correlation between those figures and the Super Bowl."

The economy would have to be in "absolutely horrendous" condition before advertisers pull away from the Super Bowl or the price for commercial time stops going anywhere but up, said **George Haley**, director of the University of New Haven's Centre for International Competitiveness in Connecticut.

"The great advantage of the Super Bowl from an advertising viewpoint," he said, "is that it is only one championship game -- unlike basketball, baseball and hockey, which have series. If there's a clean sweep in a series, networks have to refund advertisers either in time or dollars. That's why Super Bowl commercials have taken off. It's one game and you're out."

The GoDaddy approach of drawing Super Bowl viewers to a website is a growing trend.

The Internet and other media coverage have give the commercials unprecedented exposure, added Mr. Haley, who says he has been invited to a Super Bowl party where guests will only watch and discuss the commercials.

"There is all kinds of coverage, including media analysis, public opinion polls and blogs," he said. "Every time the ads are mentioned, or seen after the event, it makes them more cost-effective."

In Canada, CTV will simulcast the Super Bowl and, according to reports, will charge advertisers a more modest \$110,000 per 30-second slot. The network also has shorter -- 10- and 15-second -- commercial segments, and while some of the CTV spots will be exclusively Canadian, ads for the sports clothing manufacturer Under Armour and job search site Monster.ca/.com will be identical on both sides of the border.

Celebrities have long played leading, but oddball, roles in Super Bowl commercials. This year's worst-kept secret is that Brad Pitt will appear in a Dell computer spot and donate his \$5-million fee to an African charity launched by U2 singer Bono.

"The best celebrity commercials are where you have odd juxtapositions that make viewers go, 'Wow,' " said Ryan Schinman, who specializes in brokering deals between celebrities and advertising agencies. He brought The Osmonds and Ozzy Osbourne's clan together for a 2003 Pepsi commercial.

"People were blown away by that juxtaposition," he said, "but since I was a kid, Pepsi has had their thumb on pop culture. They really nail it. And I hear that this year (Pepsico-owned) Doritos has done something really cool around voting."

Mr. Schinman, who has also linked Sean "Diddy" Combs with Pepsi, Madonna with Motorola, Jessica Simpson with mega-advertisers Procter and Gamble and Sharon Stone with AOL, says the aim of all Super Bowl advertisers is to create the "water-cooler spot" -- the commercial that has people talking long after the event.

But author and marketing specialist Mark Stevens says corporate America and its advertising agencies pay scant attention to the effect of Super Bowl ads on the bottom line.

"Advertising agencies make these commercials not to sell product but to showcase their agencies,' he said. "They create commercials they hope will make them famous, without any regard at all whether they will sell product. You never hear anyone inside ad agencies pointing to someone and saying, 'He's the most famous person in the agency because he's sold more Cheerios than anyone else.' It's because he won two Clios (ad industry awards). Nobody asks whether the ads sold anything."

Companies such as Anheuser-Busch and Procter & Gamble are right to advertise during the Super Bowl, added Mr. Stevens, because \$2.7 million is pocket change for them and the event is iconic.

"But for smaller companies it's dangerous and stupid," he said. "If you want to invest in a party without an expectation of result, then the Super Bowl is your guy."

Internet venues such as YouTube gives commercials an afterlife, conceded Mr. Stevens.

"But what makes it onto YouTube?" he said. "Some guy pouring beer over someone else's head so a bunch of teenagers who aren't even old enough to buy beer can watch it. Wal-Mart, one of the most successful companies ever built, has never done a so-called 'creative' commercial because when he was alive (founder) Sam Walton would have stomped on it. If you're a creative director at a big agency you won't touch a Wal-Mart commercial. You give it to someone else because you can't win a Clio with it."

The Super Bowl is a phenomenon that exists outside traditional economics, but, said Mr. Schinman, the

audience gathered around TV sets across North America will continue to be irresistible to well-heeled advertisers.

"It's the marketing sweet spot," he said.

Gone in 30 Seconds:

What An Ad Costs

On Fox: \$2.7 million

On CTV: \$110,000

Who's Advertising

Some of the big spenders advertising on Fox or CTV on Super Bowl Sunday:

- Labatt Breweries
- Rogers
- Nissan
- Disney
- Under Armour
- Best Buy
- Mazda Canada
- Campbell Soup Company
- Ford Canada
- Monster.ca
- Pepsi
- Anheuser-Busch
- godaddy
- Hyundai
- Bridgestone Tires

Colour Photo: Pepsi-QTG Canada / Pepsi's 'copier' spot will be televised to Canadian audiences during the Super Bowl. The ad is part of Pepsi's 'Forever Young' series featuring 'mature' individuals doing ridiculously juvenile things. ; Colour Photo: / GoDaddy.com, which prides itself on 'edgy' commercials, plans to run an ad featuring Indy Racing League driver Danica Patrick. ;

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