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Ad slots are game's hottest ticket

At \$2.7 million for 30 seconds of air time, the Super Bowl commercial breaks are recession-proof

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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 US 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 Emmy awards and winter TV launches, the 2008 Super Bowl 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."

But, being a Super Bowl skeptic, 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 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."

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."

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."

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 Cleos (ad awards). Nobody asks whether the ads sold anything."

Companies such as Anheuser-Busch and P&G are right to advertise during the Super Bowl, said 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."

WEB LINKS

Watch and vote on your favourite Super Bowl ads at game time:

<http://sports.aol.com/nfl/superbowlads>

Selection of the Super Bowls best commercials:

http://www.cbs.com/specials/superbowls_greatest_commercials/

Super Bowl ads preview:

http://www.ulinkx.com/playlist/2008_super_bowl_ads_preview

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