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Super Bowl television ads OK, but real show was on social media

Most of the usual elements that make traditional Super Bowl commercials memorable were present and accounted for at this year's game — humor, celebrity cameos and popular culture. But this time around, the real draw was what happened outside the broadcast.

This year, the biggest action in advertising took place off the television screen as advertisers created multilayered promotions on several fronts.

Snarky tweets, battling brands, NSFW topics and even alternative entertainment competing with the Big Game were some of the highlights of Super Bowl Sunday.

Advertising around the big game is always expensive — and somewhat of a gamble. Sponsors competing for the honor of “best Super Bowl commercial” paid up to \$5.3 million to air one 30-second commercial, generating more than \$380 million in total ad spend, according to Ad Age.

The New England Patriots won yet again, but the game was the lowest-scoring in the championship's history. The halftime show was widely panned. And, overall, Super Bowl LIII had the lowest ratings since 2008 — 100.7 million viewers across all platforms, according to Variety.

For the most part, brands played it safe with their television spots this year, avoiding political and social issues. In fact, the odds of any commercial that aired during the broadcast inspiring a real debate were as low as the game's final score.

A number of advertisers sought to capture viewers' interest with commercials about the increasing role technology plays in society. The narratives ranged from heartwarming to humorous and occasionally carried an undercurrent of anxiety about

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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technology taking over one day.

Microsoft went for heartwarming, with this year's entry featuring children with limited ability to use their hands and arms playing video games using Microsoft's Xbox Adaptive Controller.

Amazon looked at the funny side of its Alexa personal assistant by having actors demonstrate ways to use the device that didn't make the cut, such as a pet collar worn by Harrison Ford's dog.

Pringles countered with a commercial about the many flavors of its potato chips that slyly combines humor with a bit of mild social commentary. It features an Alexa-like device that answers a question about the number of flavor combinations made possible by stacking different varieties of Pringles. Just as the device begins sadly lamenting that it has no hands to stack Pringles, its owner interrupts and orders it to play the song “Funkytown.”

Some of the most entertaining advertiser-related plays took place off the television and away from the game. Social media engagement was key and, not surprisingly, Twitter seemed to be

the platform of choice, as fans (and some brands) posted brutally honest statements about the lackluster Big Game and took swipes at each other, and the advertisers.

Mercedes-Benz promoted its A-Class vehicle, and in particular its voice activation capabilities, in a humorous ad that aired during the game. The name sponsor of the host stadium — Mercedes-Benz Stadium — the luxury car company was not an official NFL Super Bowl sponsor, so it was not allowed to mention the game or create any advertising at any of the official NFL locations around the Super Bowl.

Mercedes debuted the commercial at a pop-up shop in Atlanta, with special guests, including the star, Atlanta-based rapper Ludacris. Using the hashtags #AClassRealTalk and #SB53, the “car” (and the brand) tweeted deadpan commentary on the commercials, engaging in playful banter with other advertisers like Colgate, bubbly brand carbonated water, Avocadoes from Mexico, Devour foods and Turkish Airlines.

Fans on Twitter loved the near-constant tweets during the game — especially the tweet that

shared a sentiment that many viewers were probably thinking: “If this game weren't in my stadium, I would have driven away by now.” The auto manufacturer quickly deleted the tweet, however, apparently because it received some negative reactions.

A Mercedes-Benz representative later explained that the company “didn't want that to derail what was otherwise collegial and positive interplay,” according to Business Insider.

Meanwhile, the nation's most popular beer brands got into an unexpected skirmish over corn syrup that carried on long after the Super Bowl hoopla ended.

Bud Light, which scored big pop culture points with a TV spot that combined its light-hearted, medieval-themed world with the catch-phrase “dilly, dilly” with a “Game of Thrones” promo, took an offensive stance against its rivals.

The brand aired three commercials during the game that took aim at Miller Lite and Coors Light for using corn syrup and tweeted about the ads.

Parent company MillerCoors responded on Twitter by denying that its products contain any high fructose corn syrup.

This touched off a raging Twitter battle among the beer brands.

Miller Lite posted, among other tweets, “Hey Bud Light, thanks for including us in our first Super Bowl ad in over 20 years. You forgot two things though ... we have more taste and half the carbs!”

The exchange turned into an ambush marketing windfall for Miller Lite and Coors Light since Bud Light's parent company Anheuser-Busch holds the exclusive beer rights to the Super Bowl, as Ad Age pointed out.

The National Corn Growers Association took advantage of the opportunity to jump in and

tweet its disappointment in Bud Light and invite it to discuss the benefits of corn.

People loved the brouhaha and the beer makers ran with it.

MillerCoors' CEO Gavin Hattersley noted the corn syrup controversy instigated by Bud Light was a smart marketing move by Anheuser-Busch but expressed disappointment that its rival had disparaged corn farmers and cast the beer industry in a negative light. The commercials jump-started MillerCoors employees' competitive spirit, however, he added during parent company Molson Coors Brewing Co.'s widely reported 2018 fourth-quarter earnings call in mid-February.

Hattersley went on the road in Iowa to promote MillerCoors' new #ToastToFarmers hashtag, stopping in bars around the state to meet beer lovers and promote the company's appreciation of farmers. He also met with a representative of the Iowa Corn Promotion Board. The #ToastToFarmers hashtag is intended to track MillerCoors' farmer-friendly efforts and brand promotions, according to USA Today.

Not to be outdone, Anheuser-Busch commandeered the

#ToastToFarmers hashtag to promote its own pro-farmer initiatives. Anheuser-Busch also sent its spokesperson character "Busch Guy" on a bar tour in North Dakota.

In addition, the day before Hattersley visited Iowa, Anheuser-Busch's Busch Beer posted a tweet announcing that for every retweet, the company would donate \$5 to Farm Rescue, an organization that helps farmers hit by crises such as natural disasters, injury and illness.

USA Today reported the resulting approximately 41,000 retweets meant Anheuser-Busch will donate approximately \$205,000 to Farm Rescue.

Not all of the advertising around the Big Game was "good, clean fun" – on purpose.

Kraft Heinz Co.'s frozen food brand Devour took a calculated risk with a racy concept that it debuted both before and during the Super Bowl.

Devour created Super Bowl advertising that took the concept of "food porn" to a new level. The spot, in which a woman confesses that her boyfriend has become addicted to "frozen food porn," includes all the double entendres, suggestive word play and vaguely cringeworthy images you

can imagine — and then some. The frozen food brand released a one-minute "uncensored" version online before game day and a toned-down 30-second commercial during the game.

In addition to a lively social media campaign that included the hashtag #freethefoodporn, Devour took the "porn" concept somewhat literally, running online ads that read "See hot food porn now," on Pornhub, a real porn website.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the campaign had its detractors. At least one anti-porn organization, Culture Reframed, called for a boycott of Devour, which might have actually helped Devour's campaign.

In a sign that traditional Super Bowl television commercials might be losing traction with consumers, Skittles created an ambitious Super Bowl commercial that not only didn't air during the Super Bowl but it wasn't even a commercial. Instead, the candy maker made its own musical.

Skittles mounted a single performance of "Skittles Commercial: The Broadway Musical" at New York City theater Joe's Pub, starring Broadway and Hollywood actor Michael C. Hall and

written by a Pulitzer Prize finalist Will Eno, Wired reported.

The musical roasted consumers and the advertising industry with songs like "Advertising Ruins Everything," signaling a new willingness to push the marketing envelope when it comes to attracting younger, online media-saturated consumers.

The day when brands bypass television on Super Bowl Sunday isn't here yet, but the most recent crop of Super Bowl marketing campaigns suggests that TV commercials are no longer the only game in town. This shift raises the bar for future Super Bowl marketing campaigns and means more advertisers will be thinking outside the box of broadcast commercials and looking for new ways to tie-in social media and other outlets.

After a Super Bowl game and roster of TV commercials that offered few watercooler moments, it makes sense that brands are looking for new, multimedia ways to capture consumers' attention.

What that means for brands in next year's Super Bowl is anyone's guess but advertisers have much of 2019 to figure out their next moves.