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This year's Super Bowl ads focused more on substance, less on stunts

On Super Bowl Sunday this year, all the usual suspects — from beer, soda, fast food and avocados to sneakers, tech and auto brands — were present and accounted for in the commercials. A few household names also made their Big Game debuts, including Walmart, Facebook and Jack Daniel's.

This year's on-air advertisements focused more on comedic good humor — including “wicked smaht” cars, the zany adventures of a weather man and his groundhog buddy and orange snack food dust as the ultimate excuse to get out of doing, well, just about anything — and less on political and social issues, than in past years.

The social media drama was fairly tame, lacking any of the spirited exchanges between beer brands over their use of corn syrup that captivated social media well into February (and March and April) of 2019.

Instead, a number of brands effectively used social media as either their primary marketing around the game or to augment their on-air commercials. Even an Instagram influencer's bid for the ultimate publicity fell flat — literally — when her attempt to take the field and streak during the game got her tackled by security and escorted out of the stadium — still with most of her clothes on — and charged with misdemeanor trespassing.

This year, in addition to game day advertising, some of the biggest brands went with off-broadcast, out-of-the-box marketing efforts that relied less on one-time stunts and celebrity-studded 30- and 60-second commercials, and focused more on encouraging fan loyalty, joining the dialogue surrounding fans' burning questions and investing in the future of football and its community.

Hulu cleverly found a way to get fans' attention the week before the Super Bowl by hinting at the answer to a question on



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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many football fans' minds. Although the Patriots sat out the Big Game for the first time in three years, quarterback Tom Brady's future in New England was the talk of the football world after he tweeted a photo of himself walking through a stadium tunnel just a few days before the game.

The photo turned out to be from a commercial that Hulu aired in the second quarter of the Super Bowl that started with Brady musing about knowing when to walk away from a situation and ended with him touting the streaming service's benefits.

Brady added that he wasn't going anywhere just yet. As the New York Post noted, partnering with the most-talked-about player in the league (who wasn't on the field) and the question of his football future was a clever way to ensure that viewers would hear Hulu's marketing message as well.

Despite not paying a dime for the exposure, athletic apparel giant Nike literally took center stage during the Big Game. Specifically, sharp-eyed Nike fans noticed that Colombian reggaeton singer J Balvin debuted his Air Jordan sneaker collaboration with the brand by wearing the rainbow-colored shoes during his Super Bowl halftime show performance, Billboard reported.

He was joined on stage by Puerto Rican Latin trap and reggaeton singer Bad Bunny, who also sported Nike kicks.

It was the subtlest of promotional efforts that strengthened the brand's relationship with loyal fans while offering a fun “Easter egg” to anyone who was paying attention.

At the same time, Nike played the long game by anchoring the brand to the Super Bowl's past and future. In the run-up to this year's Super Bowl, Nike announced renovations to a storied high school football venue in Miami, the Nathaniel Trzaczewski Stadium, home of seven Miami-Dade County high schools.

Nike demonstrated once again that it knows how to get the most bang for its marketing bucks. For its first-ever high school football stadium renovation project, Nike picked a venue that was not only located in Miami, the location of the 2020 Super Bowl, but also produced more players who went on to play in the National Football League than any other high school field in the country, noted CNBC.

Nike spent a reported \$2 million on a new scoreboard, locker room, press box and stadium lighting. New tracking technology boosts time-measurement precision through magnets imbedded in the field and the new artificial turf is sustainable material made from Nike's recycled athletic footwear.

Raising its own profile around Super Bowl time by focusing on the future is a strategy that the NFL Players Association

has been using for several years. The NFLPA's athlete-driven accelerator, OneTeam Collective, held its fourth annual Pitch Day for early-stage startups in Miami during the week of the Super Bowl.

The sports business accelerator invests in fledgling companies that want to use sports strategies to drive growth. Launched in 2016, the accelerator offers licensing rights of football players' images in return for equity in startups.

This year, OneTeam Collective selected

three startups to receive access to player marketing opportunities from the NFLPA and \$25,000 in credits from event sponsor Amazon Web Services, SportTechie reported. This year's winners were organic beans maker A Dozen Cousins, injury data management platform Player's Health and SwayBrand, a platform that connects brands with influencers, co-founded by former NFL defensive end Israel Idonije.

Given that dicey promotional stunts and controversial commercials can be risky

(and may not get the intended response), this year's Super Bowl advertisers, including the NFL itself, are finding that contributing in meaningful ways to increase fan engagement, build community ties and be part of football's long-term future is an effective way to build and sustain brand loyalty.

Whether smaller brands can successfully emulate this strategy remains to be seen, but it's likely that this branding approach will continue to evolve.