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Many Super Bowl commercial regulars sit out, newbies step up

Several of the biggest and most iconic brands sat out Super Bowl LV, a noteworthy move at a time when there seemed to be few surprises left for the sports world after a tumultuous 2020.

Budweiser and Pepsi decided not to field Super Bowl commercials this year, although other brands owned by their parent companies made appearances. Coca-Cola skipped the big game entirely, along with Audi and Avocados from Mexico. Meanwhile, first-time advertisers — some connected to the new national past times of ordering takeout food and spending increasing time online — stepped up instead.

The championship game between the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Kansas City Chiefs provided a semblance of normalcy for football fans, while reminding everyone what a long, strange year it's been. In-person attendance at the Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla., was allowed, but limited to just 25,000 people, about a third of the venue's capacity. The NFL charged fans \$100 to place life-size cardboard cutouts of themselves in the approximately 30,000 empty seats, according to Business Insider and other news outlets. Tom Brady was back again as one of the starting quarterbacks, this time for the game-winning Buccaneers, not the New England Patriots.

This year, less than 100 million people watched the CBS Super Bowl broadcast. The disappointing 96.4 million viewers is the smallest audience since 2007, CNBC reported. The lackluster viewership could be attributed, at least in part, to the Buccaneers' blowout 31-9 win over the Chiefs and pandemic restrictions that discouraged large Super Bowl watching gatherings.

Super Bowl LV also presented a unique challenge for brands striving to present entertaining commercial content to an emotionally raw public exhausted by ongoing medical, financial and social upheaval.

Anheuser-Busch InBev announced in January that, for the first time since 1983, its Budweiser brand would be benched during



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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this year's Super Bowl broadcast. Over the years, Budweiser's commercials for the big game have become cultural phenomena, from the brand's beloved Clydesdales tugging on our collective heart-strings to the laconic trio of frogs chirping "Bud," "Weis" and "Er."

Instead, the beer giant, whose Bud Light brand is the National Football League's official beer until 2022, took the \$1 million it would have spent on a Budweiser commercial and donated it to the ad council's COVID-19 vaccination awareness initiative. At the same time, AB InBev debuted its first corporate Super Bowl commercial, called "Let's Grab a Beer," to highlight the role its beers have played and will play again in bringing people together. The company also still bought commercial time to showcase its stable of other brands — Bud Light, Bud Light Seltzer Lemonade, Michelob Ultra and Michelob Ultra Organic Seltzer.

AB InBev wasn't the only brand that directed its Super Bowl ad money toward charitable causes. Planters, which killed off

its Mr. Peanut mascot in last year's Super Bowl ad and then ran a yearlong campaign focused on his rebirth, decided to use the approximate cost of its big game ad budget — \$5 million — to fund an initiative supporting "everyday" people and organizations performing charitable works. The donations are styled as either rewards for what Planters' parent company Kraft Heinz calls "acts of substance," or as funding to ensure that the recipients can continue their work.

And car company Kia Motors America, a Super Bowl advertiser for 11 years running, this year decided to use the money instead to support high school football programs shuttered by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a news release issued by the company ahead of the big game, the campaign is an extension of Kia's "Accelerate The Good" charitable initiative, which includes supporting college scholarship programs, homeless youth assistance, and pandemic relief efforts. The company announced that the first donation of \$50,000 would be to the Woodrow Wilson High School in Camden, N.J., and its Tigers football team, and that donations to additional teams will soon follow.

Although the Budweiser Clydesdales stayed in the barn this year, a team of horses did make an appearance during the big game, but not nationwide and not for Budweiser. Boston Beer engaged in some mild Super Bowl ambush marketing by airing a commercial in New York and Boston to promote its Sam Adams Wicked Hazy IPA. The Boston Beer ad featured horses that looked like Clydesdales and the Sam Adams character "Your Cousin From Boston" with a wicked Boston accent. The cousin pulls a pin out of a carriage hitch, allowing the horses to gallop off down the street. The equine stand-ins helped Boston Beer capitalize on the association of Budweiser's Clydesdales with the Super Bowl — and spend a fraction of the amount of money a national commercial would have cost.

Like AB InBev, PepsiCo. scaled back its Super Bowl marketing this year, deciding not

to advertise its flagship brand Pepsi in favor of focusing on its sponsorship of the Super Bowl halftime show featuring Canadian singer-songwriter The Weeknd. The company's advertising instead concentrated on marketing its Mountain Dew and Frito-Lay product brands.

Coca-Cola remained on the sidelines completely, citing the need to allocate its resources strategically. Brands that rely in part on concession sales at stadiums and movie theaters took a serious hit when the pandemic shut down sports and other entertainment venues for most of 2020. Atlanta-based Coca-Cola announced the layoff of thousands of employees in December after its revenue fell 9%, according to CBS News. With a 30-second commercial during the big game costing an estimated \$5.5 million, it's easy to see why the soda company took a pass this year.

Other Super Bowl regulars, including automakers Audi, BMW, Hyundai, Lexus, Mercedes-Benz and Porsche, stayed home. Ford and Toyota made appearances, with commercials focused on messages of unity

and hope, not their vehicles. Marketing group Avocados from Mexico also took a pass on airing an in-game commercial in favor of exploring its digital options, it told MediaPost.

That left openings for a slew of commercial advertisers to air commercials for the first time. Many newcomers came from industries that have been flourishing during the pandemic shutdown, from take-out food delivery service DoorDash and Mexican restaurant Chipotle to garden resource provider Scotts Miracle-Gro, TikTok rival Triller, and online car dealer Vroom, The Wall Street Journal reported. In fact, in a commercial starring the Muppets, DoorDash took the opportunity to remind viewers that it's expanded beyond food delivery into delivering items from convenience stores and pharmacies.

While some brands have a knack for creating compelling commercials that tap into the national mood, others addressed or pointedly ignored recent controversy, with mixed results.

Online discussion forum Reddit created a

five-second regional commercial that got Twitter talking. It indirectly acknowledged its part in facilitating a band of novice traders who briefly inflated the price of GameStop stock through Robinhood and other online brokerages. Robinhood, on the other hand, pointedly avoided the topic by deciding to air its first Super Bowl ad, a 30-second spot about increasingly accessible investing options that it reportedly had created before the GameStop controversy. The ad drew largely negative comments on social media based on the company's move to restrict traders' use of the app to trade GameStop stock, according to Ad Age.

Super Bowl IV has entered the history books as the first COVID-19 NFL championship game and — fingers crossed — hopefully the last. But the social and financial effects of 2020 are likely to linger, with venerable brands reassessing their positions and upstart advertisers staying in the spotlight. Regardless of what the rest of 2021 brings, both sports and marketing will have to stay on their toes.