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Ann Aubry

Illinois Wesleyan University

Jeff Hanna

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Are Super Bowl Ads Worth More Than Merely Laughs?

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - On Super Bowl Sunday advertisers will spend a record \$2.4 million for 30 seconds of air time. Is it worth it?

Yes - and no - says Illinois Wesleyan marketing professor Carrie Trimble. Yes, if the ad is compelling. No, if the audience laughs but can't remember the product.

Super Bowl advertising costs six times as much as 30 seconds on network prime time programming. That lofty price, says Trimble, is due in part to the added benefits of being a Super Bowl advertiser.

“For one thing, an advertiser gets all the publicity, all the earned media that comes when people talk about the fact that you've purchased the time of a Super Bowl,” Trimble says. “Big spenders like Anheuser Busch get the right to be the only beer that advertises, and there's added value there. Plus, you do get the captive audience.”

The captive audience, Trimble says, is a once-a-year phenomenon because people have become accustomed to watching the Super Bowl advertising with intent. “Rather than considering a Super Bowl ad as an intrusion in the program that they're watching, people look forward to watching these ads.”

Often, Trimble adds, the anticipation is for an ad that will entertain. That is why the tradition of advertisers for the Super Bowl is to make you laugh. The danger is that those laughs may not translate into advertisers' real goal - to make the product memorable.

If you spend all your money on something that's funny but doesn't drive home a selling point about your particular product, you've wasted your time and obviously a lot of cash,” Trimble says.

One of the intriguing trends in advertising campaigns is the tendency for companies to co-opt their competitors' campaign. Miller Lite and Bud Lite, for instance, have dueling commercials featuring football officials.

“They're funny ads, but I think they can also be confusing. You may not know which product is being advertised at all even though you're laughing at what you see,” says Trimble. “In some cases, I think it's a matter of one-upmanship, which doesn't mean as much to the consumer as to the people creating the ads.”

As the ads come into focus for this year's Super Bowl, there has been considerable conversation about toning down the content, making the ads less risqué. Whether or not that happens remains to be seen.

“They've promised us no horses with flatulence this year,” says Trimble. “There were a lot of pretty sophomoric jokes last year. If their only target market is male viewers ages 12 to 25, that might work. But I'm guessing that they have targets outside that range.”

To discuss Super Bowl advertising with Trimble, contact either Ann Aubry or Jeff Hanna at (309) 556-3181.