

Super Bowl Ad Previews Draw Online Attention, With Criticism



Don't misunderstand John Norman, the chief creative officer at TBWA/Chiat/Day Los Angeles. He is excited to be working on a commercial, for Pepsi Next cola, that will appear during [Super Bowl XLVII](#) on Sunday — the biggest day of the year for advertising as well as for football.

Still, he is disappointed that consumers can already watch [an extended version](#) of the commercial online, in stark contrast to a decades-old strategy of building anticipation for Super Bowl spots by keeping them under wraps until the game.

"I'm more of the old school; I like the element of surprise," Mr. Norman said. "If I ruled the world, I'd go back to holding out and waiting."

His client, the PepsiCo Beverages division of PepsiCo, which makes Pepsi Next, sees it differently. The company is among a long list of Super Bowl sponsors jumping the gun by sharing commercials — shorter versions, longer versions or the versions that will appear on Sunday — hours, days or even weeks before the game.

"The world has changed," said Angelique Krembs, vice president for marketing for the Pepsi trademark at PepsiCo Beverages. "The conversation used to happen after the game. Now, enabled by social media, there's a lot of conversation before the game about what's coming up, and we want to be the most talked-about brand in

that conversation.”

The willingness of consumers to watch ads on social media like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube — and to discuss and share them with friends and family — is rewriting the Super Bowl playbook for Madison Avenue. Marketers and agencies are deciding that it’s better to give up the benefits of surprising viewers during the game in favor of gaining additional attention before.

“We don’t see any down side” to forgoing the “aha!” moment during the game, said Scott Campbell, general manager for integrated marketing communications at Colgate-Palmolive, which bought a Super Bowl commercial for its Mennen Speed Stick deodorant and uploaded the spot to the brand’s [YouTube channel](#) on Wednesday.

“I don’t think we’ll get 110 million viewers before the game,” Mr. Campbell said, referring to the number of people expected to watch the Super Bowl, “but whatever we get by giving it to our online community is all to the plus.”

Another reason Colgate-Palmolive released the commercial early on social media was that it is part of “a campaign that was social from the get-go,” he said. The campaign began with a contest on Twitter, and the commercial was produced through Tongal, a company that uses a crowdsourcing model to develop creative ideas for ads.

To be sure, priming the pump before a Super Bowl spot runs does not guarantee success.

“Pre-announcements can build up hype, but if the ad isn’t seen as dynamic, innovative or exciting, I don’t think the sneak peeks work,” said George R. Cook, executive professor of marketing and psychology at the Simon Graduate School of Business at the University of Rochester. “There may not be so much ‘wow’ or positive bounce.”

Another risk, Professor Cook said, is that “the message can wear out” before the game, lowering the return on the large investment in a Super Bowl campaign. CBS, which is broadcasting Super Bowl XLVII, is charging an estimated \$3.7 million to \$3.8 million for 30 seconds of commercial time, with some going for \$4 million.

Opening the kimono before Super Bowl Sunday may also backfire if consumers dislike what they see. For instance, Volkswagen of America has been fending off negative responses to its Super Bowl ad since [previews began online](#) on Monday.

The Volkswagen spot features an actor playing a white Minnesotan who speaks with a lilting “Yah, mon” Jamaican accent, meant to encourage drivers to “get happy.” The

commercial, by Deutsch L.A., has been denounced as culturally insensitive or racist.

“We didn’t go in saying, ‘Could there be a backlash?’ ” said Tim Mahoney, chief marketing officer at Volkswagen of America, because testing showed that the ad conveyed “the message we want to deliver, that this is a brand that can put a smile on your face.”

“I’m pretty pleased that within 24 hours we had 1.1 million people watch the spot” on YouTube, Mr. Mahoney said. That figure had grown to more than 2.1 million Wednesday night, and despite the criticism, he said, reactions have been “overwhelmingly positive.”

The additional time to scrutinize the contents of Super Bowl commercials also means a much earlier start to the postgame tradition of challenging the ad industry’s creativity by pointing out all of the spots that echo one another. For example, several commercials, including Pepsi Next’s, will promote free coupons and other giveaways.

And at least two commercials, for E*Trade and Kia, include images of baby astronauts, while a third, for the new Axe Apollo line of products, sold by Unilever, features a young male astronaut.

Matthew McCarthy, senior director of brand development for Axe North America at Unilever, said he was undaunted by pregame comparisons. “Do I hope having assets out there before the Super Bowl generates buzz?” he said. “Of course I’d like that.” The Axe Apollo commercial was created by Bartle Bogle Hegarty.

As for E*Trade, “luckily, our spot has only one second” of a baby astronaut amid a variety of images, said Tor Myhren, president and chief creative officer at Grey New York, which creates E*Trade’s ads.

The commercial, scheduled for social media on Friday, features the “talking” E*Trade baby advising investors not to waste money on 401(k) fees. In addition to visiting space, the baby indulges in pursuits like playing polo and drinking — milk — at a nightclub.

“I have mixed emotions about running Super Bowl spots early,” Mr. Myhren said, because it dilutes the appeal of the game as “America’s last campfire, where everyone gets together to watch the same thing at the same time.”

Even so, “you spend a lot of money on a 30-second commercial in the Super Bowl,” he said. “You may be a fool not to leverage the opportunities.”