Commercial and Promotional Programming Strategies in the Telecast of Super Bowl XLIV

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Abstract

This study investigates commercial and promotional programming strategies employed by CBS in the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV (2010). Pods, spot commercials, spot promotions, mentions, hybrid spots, and PSA's are examined in this content analysis. Pop-up ads and other convergent advertising such as graphic promotions are also measured. Results of these measurements are compared to major network prime-time broadcasts and regular season National Football League (NFL) telecasts. The primacy effect of serial positioning is presented as a basis for commercial programming strategies. Strategies designed to increase advertising revenue, effectiveness and promotional opportunities are discussed.

Introduction

Super Bowl telecasts have proven to be some of the most popular television programs in history. Although the first two NFL-American Football League (AFL) World Championship Games in 1967 and 1968 (later to be officially renamed Super Bowls I and II) were poorly attended, the television ratings were still high (Oriard, 2007, p. 21). Professional football is well suited for providing interesting television programming. The fast and rough action has a dramatic quality that is entertaining for viewers. Perhaps more than any other major sport, football allows for frequent breaks in the action, which creates opportunities for the placement of television advertising. If team time-outs, injury time-outs, and official reviews of close plays are insufficient for programmers to maintain their schedules of commercials, producers may request a referee on the field to call a "television time-out." With the game's exciting action and structure well suited for the insertion of spot commercials, the NFL and major broadcasts networks have partnered to produce television's most highly watched programs.

Aside from the game, Super Bowl commercials are very popular among viewers and highly profitable for networks. Programming the ads becomes a major responsibility for broadcasters. Marketers pay exceptionally high rates for the airtime, a reported $2.5 to $2.9 million for a 30 second Super Bowl XLIV spot (Scheichner & Ovide, 2010) and have an interest in achieving maximum effectiveness. Numerous studies have investigated serial positioning on viewers' brand memory and demonstrated a primacy effect regarding better recall for commercials appearing at earlier positions of a pod (e.g. Li, 2010; Newell & Wu, 2003; Pieters & Bijmolt, 1997). Networks must manage commercial programming to maximize profitability and promotional opportunities while satisfying advertisers' concerns regarding effectiveness.

The purpose of the study at hand is to measure the structure, frequency, and duration of advertising programming in the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV. Specifically, the study investigates pods per hour; commercials per pod; and pod duration. Convergent advertising in the form of pop-up ads and graphic promotions is also measured. Results of these measurements are compared to network prime-time broadcasts and regular season NFL telecasts in order to determine strategies employed by CBS in programming its advertising. The study applies academic rigor in an analysis that is relevant to researchers and practitioners in the televised sport marketplace. Marketers utilizing television advertising platforms gain valuable information from the results of this study.

Development of the Super Bowl Telecast

The brand equity of the NFL rose dramatically under the leadership of Commissioner Pete Rozelle, who served in the position from 1960 until 1989. Rozelle utilized his background in public relations to foster brand image and is credited with developing the business model of the modern NFL (Fortunato, 2008). Effective brand management led to increased revenue by negotiating the league's television rights contracts as a collective entity rather than on the basis of individual teams. The adoption of revenue sharing allowed for a more equitable distribution of revenue and helped maintain competitive balance, which increased brand quality.

Rozelle also extended the brand beyond the games, notably through NFL Properties and NFL Films. Convinced of the importance of television in marketing the NFL, Rozelle was instrumental in developing *Monday Night Football*, the Super Bowl as a televised sportscast, and televising the professional football draft (Fortunato).

With the rise in popularity of the NFL and the Super Bowl, the commercials have generated enormous interest among viewers. Parallel to the competition on the field, the commercials are engaged in a competition to determine which is most liked among viewers. Special television shows such as the *Super Bowl's Greatest Commercials* are now programs in their own right. The competition among the commercials which has been informally referred to as the "Ad Bowl," (Vranica, 2010) became a focus of national attention in 1989 with the advent of the USA Today Ad Meter survey. The survey involves 250 adult volunteers who watch the commercials and press a handheld meter to signify how much they like each ad ("How Ad Meter works," 2010).

Recent research suggests that interest in the commercials among viewers rivals that of the game played on the field. A survey of over 25,000 households in Nielsen's Homescan Panel reported that 51% of respondents enjoyed the commercials in the telecast more than the game itself (Nielsen Company, 2010a). From an aesthetic perspective, the commercials have high production values and the frequent use of humor offers a bit of comic relief to the rough competition that occurs on the field. The Super Bowl telecast has arguably developed into a hybrid television program that is part championship professional football game and part commercial showcase. The pre-game publicity surrounding the commercials and the afterlife, which has grown precipitously in recent years with "online buzz," have increased value for advertisers.

Spot Commercials

The inventory of spot commercials is the primary source of revenue for broadcast networks. Financial analysts estimate that ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC should net $8.26 billion in prime-time advertising commitments in 2010, a 20% increase from 2009 although still below levels from 2008 (Steinberg, 2010). For Fox's telecast of Super Bowl XLII (2008), spot sales were estimated to exceed $195 million (Nielsen Company, 2009).

Although television spot commercials face new forms of competition in the advertising industry with the numerous entertainment options consumers now have, spots have proven effectiveness and still constitute a good media buy for advertisers. Walsh, Kim, and Ross (2008), investigated brand recall and recognition rates between television viewers and video gamers. One treatment group watched a 15-minute segment of a NASCAR telecast and the other played a NASCAR video game for 15 minutes. Brand recall was significantly higher for the group that watched the television spot commercials. Although recognition rates displayed no significant differences, the researchers concluded that for maximum effectiveness, television spot commercials were superior to placement of advertising in video games (Walsh et al.).

Although specifics of programming policies vary by network, some standard practices have emerged in the television advertising industry. Rotation of multiple ads by the same client through pod positions ensures that clients will receive at least one first or "A" position slot in a pod. The provision of category exclusivity within a pod helps avoid ad confusion among viewers. Networks also maintain an inventory of mentions. These short advertisements are offered as "brought to you by," "presented by," and "sponsored by," availabilities.

On-Air Promotions for Broadcast Networks

Broadcast networks program a variety of on-air promotions in order to enhance brand awareness among viewers. These include: spot promos; graphic promos with network logos embedded within the program; and "hybrid" spots, which are produced in collaboration with a commercial sponsor. Spot promos frequently feature upcoming shows but online services and other marketing platforms are also promoted. Many of the spot promos in NFL telecasts are dedicated for a variety of NFL platforms such as the NFL Network, website and merchandise. Downey (2007) reports that 12% of A position slots are reserved for promos in network broadcasting and occupy over 50% of these prime position slots in cable.

Walker and Eastman (2003) cited three functions of on-air promotions: to generate program sampling; to maintain audience size; and to brand program services. The study measured the number of program promotions during prime-time and on weekends aired by major broadcast networks and compared the data to subsequent program ratings. Four structural variables investigated included: 1) frequency of promotions; 2) construction of single program or multiple program promos; 3) distance from the airing of the promoted program; and 4) length.

Of the four predictor variables, only the frequency of promotions was positively related to program ratings. Demographic data showed network promotions were more effective with younger viewers (Walker & Eastman).

Advances in digital signal processing over the past three decades have fostered television production techniques involving Digital Video Effects (DVE). Eye-catching images that bear the logos of the network, NFL, or featured teams are inserted into the live feed. These graphic promotions are programmed frequently and assume a variety of forms. A continuous scoreboard graphic often appears in an upper corner of the frame and displays information such as the score, time remaining, down and distance. The technique was originally developed by ESPN and has now become standard with broadcast networks. Another graphic originated by ESPN is the "scroll" or "crawl" that appears at the bottom of the screen and depicts updates from other games and news. For transitions between live action and replays, the network logo wipes across the frame. Most networks program a "bug" in a corner of the frame that displays the logo throughout the telecast and offers almost continuous promotion. These embedded promos create a new experience for viewers and blur the distinction between program and non-program material.

Pop-up ads originated in Internet advertising and have now been adapted by programmers in television advertising. These ads usually appear in a small portion of the frame with durations of 10 seconds. Generally, pop-ups are aired without audio but occasionally are accompanied by a sound effect or announcer voice-over. Initially, television pop-up ads appeared as graphics that occupied a small portion of the frame but networks have more recently developed a variety of larger and more creative designs. Pop-ups and graphic promotions represent the convergence of television and computer technologies. Their frequent use in television broadcasting aids in branding programming and creates sponsorship opportunities.

Another new production technique, the hybrid spot, allows collaborative advertising for spot promotions. Through an announcer voice-over or prominent placement, the hybrid spot includes a sponsor message as part of a promotion for an upcoming show (Steinberg, 2007). Although hybrids currently have limited use in television advertising, some marketers may find this approach less expensive than spot commercials.

Serial Position Effects

Primacy and recency effects of better recall for first and last items presented in a series have been well documented in research conducted by learning and cognitive psychologists (e.g. Kerr, Ward & Avons, 1998; Murdock, 1962). Lower recall for intervening items is generally attributed to interference in processing successive stimuli. Advertising and marketing researchers have applied these theories in studies that examine viewers' recall of television commercials. Newell and Wu (2003) surveyed viewers of Super Bowl XXXIV (2000) to measure brand and ad recall. The first phase hypothesized that ads placed in the first position of a pod would be recalled at a significantly higher rate than those in later positions. The second phase hypothesized brand recall would decline as the game progressed. Results indicated a strong primacy effect for commercials aired first in a pod. Ads aired in the beginning of the game were also recalled significantly higher than those aired in the fourth quarter. Interference of previous ads and ad fatigue were cited as factors in the lowered recall (Newell & Wu).

Li (2010) conducted telephone interviews of 769 randomly selected viewers of Super Bowl XL (2006) during the week following the telecast. Respondents were asked to recall brands shown in commercials in the telecast. The results also indicated a strong primacy effect with commercials at earlier positions in pods. For the entire telecast, commercials pods presented earlier in the game generated better recall and recognition than those presented later. The number of ads per pod negatively affected brand recognition but not recall (Li). The current study investigates commercial pods programmed in the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV, regular season NFL telecasts, and network primetime broadcasts. Pods are examined in terms of frequency, duration, number of spots, and relative percentage of commercials versus promotions. Additionally, convergent advertising in the form of pop-ups and graphic promotions is analyzed.

Method

Content analysis has been employed in numerous studies and has proven to be a valuable tool for advertising and marketing researchers (e.g. Abernathy & Franke, 1996; Bae, 2000). The ability of the methodology to generate discrete categories and accurately measure those contents provides an objective aid in decision making for researchers and practitioners.

Marketers face many challenges with consumers accessing a variety of new digital media. The taxonomic and empirical character of content analysis produces clear results that are beneficial in describing and understanding principles and practices of contemporary marketing.

The telecast of Super Bowl XLIV produced by CBS on February 7, 2010 was recorded on DVD with a VHS videotape recording used as a backup (TRT=3 hours 51 minutes). Categories selected in the analysis were mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Items in categories were individually classified, timed, and tabulated. For comparison, telecasts of normal Sunday prime-time programming by the major broadcast networks, ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC, were also recorded and analyzed. Network telecasts were randomly selected from the sampling frame, a four-week period following the Super Bowl XLIV telecast. Additionally, network telecasts of regular season NFL games by CBS, Fox, and NBC, were randomly selected from the 2010 season, recorded, and analyzed. Traditional commercial programming practices of rotation of ads through pod positions and category exclusivity within pods were also investigated. Contents from the onset of the selected telecasts to their end, inclusive of a final commercial pod after the end of the program, were analyzed. The study generated 8 data sets: Super Bowl LXIV; four major network prime-time broadcasts; and three broadcast network regular season NFL games. Prime-time broadcasts were recorded from 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM. In all, 25 hours and 13 minutes of network programming were analyzed.

Categories chosen for this content analysis included the following types of advertisements programmed in the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV: spot commercials; spot promos; pop-up promos and pop-up ads; mentions; hybrid spots; PSA's; and graphic promotions embedded in the program. Calculations focused on the frequencies and durations of the individual entities of the categories as well as how they are grouped into pods. Network and local spots were included in the analysis. Graphic promotions were calculated only in regard to the number of their unique occurrences.

Not included in this analysis is the placement advertising that occurs when venue signage and sponsors' logos appears on camera in the normal course of game coverage. Additionally, exposures of individual team logos were not included in this analysis.

Results

A summary of the analysis of pods programmed in Super Bowl XLIV and the comparison groups is presented in Table 1. Categories include: pods per hour; mean pod duration; spots per pod; and the proportion of spot commercials and spot promos. In regard to the frequency of pods programmed in the telecasts, the Super Bowl, with 9.4 pods per hour, and NFL telecasts, with an average of 9.2 pods per hour, show that the football games contained nearly twice as many pods as did network prime-time, which averaged 5.4 pods per hour. In terms of pod duration, differences in football game telecast and prime-time broadcasts were also observed. Pods from Super Bowl XLIV measured an average duration of 1:48 and NFL telecasts averaged 1:41 while prime-time broadcasts averaged 3:02. The calculation of the number of spots in each pod also indicated marked differences in programming approaches. 4.0 spots per pods were programmed in Super Bowl XLIV and 3.1 for averaged NFL telecasts while prime-time broadcasts contained 7.8 spots per pod. All broadcasts contained more spot commercials than spot promotions. The results of this study showed that 68% of spots were commercials in Super Bowl XLIV; 71% for averaged NFL telecasts; and 71% in network prime-time.

The durations of the pods were highly variable in Super Bowl XLIV. Pods ranged from 30 seconds to 3:15 with a standard deviation of 43.59 seconds. A similar practice was observed in the comparison groups. No standard pod duration could be detected in any of the 8 data sets. The most frequently occurring pod duration in Super Bowl XLIV was 1:30 but only 6 of the 36 pods had this duration.

CBS programmers used a variety of advertising platforms in the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV. The frequency, percentage of all ads, and sums of durations of the various platforms are reported in Table 2. Spot commercials were the most popular platform for programmers in terms of frequency (98), percentage of all ads (50%), and summed duration (52:45). The second most popular platform was spot promotions (42), accounting for 21% of all ads, and having a summed duration of 10:35. 30 mentions constituted 15% of all ads with a summed duration of 2:35. The 15 pop-ups amounted to 8% of all ads totaling 1:35 in duration. In terms of frequency, hybrids and PSA's were rarely programmed accounting for 4% and 2% of all ads respectively.

The affiliate station ran 3 local spot commercials (3% of the total spot commercial inventory) for a summed duration of 1:30. The affiliate also received 2 pop-ups and 2 spot promotions.

Durations of spot commercials and spot promotions are presented in Table 3. The data indicate that 30-second spots were the most popular among all programmers constituting about three fourths of the inventories of Super Bowl XLIV and NFL telecasts and about two thirds of prime-time inventories. Super Bowl XLIV programmers scheduled a higher number of 60-second spots than did comparison groups. Spot promotions were considerably shorter in duration. The 10-second spot promos were most common in Super Bowl XLIV and NFL telecasts while the 5-second promo occurred most often in prime-time.

The results of the analysis of pop-ups are shown in Table 4. Super Bowl XLIV contained 3.9 pop-ups per hour, roughly equivalent to 4.2 in NFL telecasts. Network prime-time showed a slightly higher use in programming with 4.9 pop-ups per hour. 73% of Super Bowl XLIV pop-ups were sponsored as compared to the 31% average of the NFL regular season telecasts. Network prime-time does not currently have any sponsorship of pop-ups. The most commonly used graphic promotions involved display of the network logo on the scoreboard graphic, wipes of the logo in transitions between live action and replays, and network bugs. This study measured an average of 141.8 unique occurrences of graphic promotions per hour in Super Bowl XLIV and an NFL average of 124.3.

The standard practice of rotating pod positions for multiple exposures of a particular brand was generally observed by CBS programmers in the Super Bowl XLIV telecast. Of the 11 brands purchasing multiple spots, 9 received at least one A position slot. The other 2 brands received last position adjacencies. All clients with multiple spots also received at least one mention in the telecast. Additionally, programming policies observing category exclusivity were generally practiced. However, of the 36 pods programmed in Super Bowl XLIV, two violations of category exclusivity were noted in the results of this study.

Results of the study also measured 17:51 non-programming minutes per hour in Super Bowl XLIV as compared to 16:02 in regular season NFL telecasts and 16:45 in primetime. Nielsen measured prime-time non-programming content in 2008 at 15:10 (Nielsen Company, 2008). Current results show a 9% increase in prime-time non-programming minutes per hour over 2008 levels. The most popular advertising category in Super Bowl XLIV was automotive with 15 spots totaling 9:00 duration. Other leading advertising categories included: beer (9 spots totaling 5:15); food (8 spots totaling 3:45); financial services (7 spots totaling 3:15); and motion pictures (7 spots totaling 3:15).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the contents of the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV in order to determine commercial programming strategies employed by CBS in production of the program. The increased number of pods in the football telecasts addresses advertisers' concerns of the primacy effect of serial order. Prior research has established the increased effectiveness of television ads appearing in the A position of commercial pods. Networks create more A position slots by programming more pods. The strategy of programming more pods is facilitated by the nature of the sport of football, which allows for frequent breaks in the action. As reported by Zhao (1997), effectiveness also increases with fewer commercials per pod, which minimizes interference effects. Thus the increase in the number of commercial pods and requisite A position slots combined with the practice of programming shorter pods with fewer spots utilizes the results of prior research regarding effectiveness. Additionally, CBS programmed four pods in the telecast of Super Bowl XLIV that contained only one commercial. These one-commercial pods represent some of the most highly valued slots in the network's inventory.

The results showed that the duration of pods in Super Bowl XLIV was highly variable. This condition was noted in each of the other 7 data sets analyzed in this study. Programming pods of irregular durations does discourage some types of ad avoidance behavior like zapping and leaving the viewing area. Short pod durations may foil viewer attempts to correctly time non-viewing activities, resulting in missing some of the game action.

The number of non-programming minutes per hour (17:51) observed in the Super Bowl XLIV telecast was greater than the NFL average (16:02) or the prime-time average (16:45). These levels demonstrate that CBS programmers maximized inventory for the broadcast of Super Bowl XLIV. Although such levels invite an interpretation of advertising clutter, the unique nature of Super Bowl telecasts should be taken into consideration.

With 51% of the audience more interested in watching the commercials (Nielsen Company, 2010a), the unusually high level of advertisements addresses viewers' interest in the commercial showcase portion of the telecast. Given the popularity of the commercials, the strategy has proven to be effective in delivering programming that the majority of the audience wants and in generating high profits for the network.

Based on the results of this study, pop-up advertising in television has emerged as a viable platform for programmers to deliver promotional and commercial messages. Pop-ups originated in Internet advertising and the use of pop-ups by television programmers represents a convergent approach. In addition to the advances in DVE, televised pop-ups have been facilitated by High Definition (HD) broadcasts and the adoption of wide screen technology by consumers. The higher resolution offered by these new systems has allowed the small print typically used in these embedded advertisements to be legible to viewers. With 73% of pop-ups in Super Bowl XLIV receiving sponsorship, these convergent ads demonstrate their commercial value. Pop-ups in regular season NFL telecasts were mostly valued in terms of promotion. Prime-time programmers use pop-ups entirely for promotion and rely primarily on higher tiered spots for commercial inventory.

Advances in DVE, HD, and wide-screen technology also aid in programming graphic promotions. These advertisements are embedded within the program, which gives flexibility to promotion programming. For CBS telecasts of NFL games, including Super Bowl XLIV, programmers have branded various types of graphics employed in replays and statistics. For example, slow motion replays are branded as "Super-Vision" and the popular freeze frame with perspective shift replays are branded as "Eye-Vision." Statistics embedded in the program are branded as "Stat Pack" for relevant bundles of prior statistical information and "Stat Trax" documents on-going accumulation of player and team statistics accrued during the game. In accessing programming strategies, the results of this study demonstrate that networks routinely rely on these convergent advertisements in delivering promotional messages. The numerous promotions demonstrate that programmers use the high viewership of the Super Bowl to brand the network and to promote prime-time telecasts.

The findings of the study indicated that the practice of rotating ads through pod positions was generally upheld by CBS as 9 of the 11 brands with multiple spots were assigned to at least one A position slot. The 2 brands without A position slots did receive last position adjacencies, which may have some advantage with a recency effect, although a number of researchers have failed to detect significant recency effects (e.g. Li, 2010; Newell & Wu, 2003; Zhao, 1997). CBS programmers adopted a strategy of rewarding long-term clients like Coca-Cola and Budweiser. Coca-Cola purchased two 60-second spots and both of these were programmed in A positions. Of the 8 Budweiser spots shown in the telecast, 4 were programmed in A positions. These clients' spots also tended to appear earlier in the broadcast, before ad fatigue dampens effectiveness. Such considerations are common for long-term clients purchasing significant amounts of airtime. The results of this study identified violations of category exclusivity in 2 of the 36 pods programmed in Super Bowl XLIV. Both violations involved mixed pods containing network and local spots in the automotive category. The entire analysis tabulated 184 pods, 4 of which violated category exclusivity always involving local spots in the automotive category.

PSA programming was not a high priority in Super Bowl XLIV, constituting only about 2% of the total number of ads and 1% of advertising minutes per hour. Similar results were observed in comparison groups. Network programmers miss an important opportunity by assigning a low priority to scheduling PSA's. Babak and Wolfe (2006) report that corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are altruistic and pragmatic, positively affecting society and enhancing brand image. Developing PSA programming as a CSR initiative allows networks to perform important community services for charities and civic organizations. Additionally, the practice helps ensure long-term growth for the network.

Managerial Implications

For advertising agents and consultants; this content analysis offers valuable information with its categorization and measurement of advertising. The NFL has become the leading brand in the televised sport marketplace. Super Bowl XLIV was viewed in 51.7 million US households, earned a 45.0 household rating, and became the most watched television show among households in history (Nielsen Company, 2010b). Advertisers desiring maximum effectiveness of Super Bowl commercials have the results of this study to aid in securing A position slots. Marketers purchasing NFL or prime-time advertising also benefit from this analysis.

Additionally, the results of the study regarding non-programming minutes and frequencies of ads in leading categories allow agents and consultants to better advice clients on clutter issues. Understanding the relative proportions of advertising programmed by each network leverages valuable information to advertisers in negotiating contracts.

Sponsors' communication and marketing managers also benefit from the analysis presented in this study. Super Bowl advertising is ideal for launching new products, introducing marketing campaigns, and gaining brand recognition (Oriard, 2007, p. 127). Although Super Bowl XLIV's average household rating was the highest in history (Nielsen Company, 2010b), it is difficult to measure the total advertising effectiveness of a Super Bowl ad based solely on ratings. In addition to the telecast viewership, publicity is exceptionally high and online buzz generates considerable afterlife. A new Nielsen metric, Blended Media Score (BMS), tracks online buzz from social media, like Facebook and Twitter, and blends television ratings data to present a better estimate of total advertising effectiveness (Nielsen Company, 2010c).

Super Bowl ads command extremely high rates but marketers considering Super Bowl advertising must also budget for high production costs and costs for appropriate ROI analyses. Despite high expenses, Super Bowl ad buys are reliable and effective. The results of this study demonstrated that CBS programmers and those of comparison groups generally observed practices of ad rotation and category exclusivity for clients. Pop-ups were routinely used by programmers and this convergent platform creates options for sponsors in designing marketing plans. Looking toward the future, the continued advancement of DVE, particularly in 3D television, gives communication and marketing managers important new tools for developing advertising campaigns. The results of this study showed that long-term clients received favorable placement in programming. Building long-term partnerships with networks offers benefits that add value to campaigns.

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