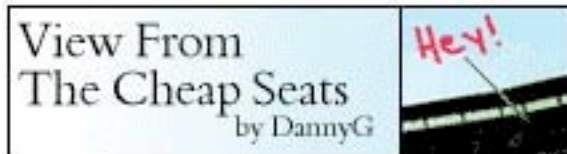


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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The Super Critics

The ad world's biggest showcase is everyone's turn to weigh in

This column is being posted less than 3 weeks before Super Bowl XL. Just think how appropriate the Roman numerals seem to be this year. Because in the ad industry, the Super Bowl is always an extra-large sized serving of hype, hope, craft and crap.

I no longer believe Super Bowl advertisers pay \$2.4 million for 30 seconds because they have a large captive audience. Like any other day, the commercials compete for the viewers' attention amidst a host of other distractions. I've even been to Super Bowl parties full of advertising industry people, who supposedly would be the most interested audience, where few people are even paying any attention to the ads.

Instead, the \$2.4 million buys hype—in the weeks leading up to, and after, the game. Most ads are revealed long before the game starts. It's the added publicity that justifies the price.

But with added publicity comes added scrutiny.

Go watch TV over the next few weeks. Instant advertising experts and prognosticators will pop up everywhere. The ads will be regularly played on CNN, Fox News and MSNBC, followed by banal punditry. And your local Eyewitness News crew, no doubt, will also have their opinion. Financial analysts on TV and in the paper will weigh in on who's advertising during the Super Bowl and what their stock will be worth based on how good the ad is.

In other words, everyone in America turns into Bob Garfield for a week.

The Super Bowl is big business, but the Super Bowl ad business is a cottage industry as well. USA Today has turned their Super Bowl "Ad Meter" into an annual ritual. Supposedly, they get a bunch of "average" consumers, strap them in, stick a dial in their hands and let them move the dial up or down based upon how much they like the spot. (According to USA Today, the technical term for this is a "continuous real-time focus group.")

CEO's and Marketing Directors at the companies who advertise do pay attention, though. With so much cash laid out, no CEO wants to wake up on Monday after the big game, already nursing a hangover, only to find out their commercial has been roundly panned by the focus group.

But for the ad industry in general, the Ad Meter doesn't mean squat. Because deep down, most creative people really don't want to know what regular consumers think. Regular consumers like Jared from Subway. They like the AFLAC duck. They like talking chimps and dressed up chimps and people imitating chimps. Think of the Super Bowl and its ad winners and losers as the People's Choice Awards for advertising.

That's OK though: the ad industry quickly shakes off the Super Bowl in order to serve up the annual season of self-gratification, the ADDYs, ANDYs, CLIOS, One Show, and other award shows. The people strapped to the USA Today Ad Meter go back to being comfortably ensconced in their insurance sales and forklift operating jobs so the self-appointed geniuses of the ad world can tell us what rightly deserves to be rewarded. Usually, the USA Today Ad Meter winners don't get Pencils. I'm willing to bet this year's One Show will be Clydesdale-free.

Both the USA Today Ad Meter and the ADDYs have their place in the advertising world. Because we should always strive to be the most unique communicators we can be. But we also should never forget that that the majority of the audience we communicate with doesn't care if the logo is too big, the headline's a pun, or the visual's been done before.

Pretending that the ads consumers like on Super Bowl Sunday don't matter is the game we play. And that's probably a good thing. Our industry can't handle too bright a spotlight from the rest of the media. We hate to subject ourselves to vocal public scrutiny. We can't deal with a world where everyone's a critic. Perhaps that's because we're self-critical enough as it is.