By Robert Passikoff
President, Brand Keys

No—Save Your Money

If you can afford $3 million for an ad, you should be smart enough to spend it elsewhere.

Let's get the obvious stuff out of the way first, shall we? First, the Super Bowl gets about 90 million viewers—maybe 150 million. Or a gabillion. Whatever the head count, it's a bigger audience than any other media venue can give you. Second, those hoards of watchers purportedly translate to a big bang for your advertising dollar. Third: Watching commercials made especially for the big game has become a spectator sport nearly on par with the big game itself. And finally, as they chew their Cool Ranch Doritos and stare saucer-eyed at their jumbo, flat-screen, high-def TVs, these fans represent the broadest demographic you can possibly imagine.

Well, forgive me for dropping the remote in the onion dip, but I have to counter this branding fantasy with a point that's less obvious. Allow me to consult my gilt-edged copy of the *Sacred History of Marketing*. Ah—here's the passage: "Lo, though many eyeball watcheth thy costly commercials, it doth not effective advertising make."

In other words, it's long been appropriate—and more appropriate than ever—to ask: "Is a Super Bowl buy giving me a big bang, or am I pouring millions into a black hole?"

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Now, it's fair to say that the Super Bowl advertiser is buying a chance at getting attention that transcends the game itself. After all, the ads no longer play opposite the spectacle, they're part of it, so there's social capital to be made the next day at office water coolers across the nation. (A note here to our Word-of-Mouth and Buzz brethren: Buzz comes in two frequencies-positive *and* negative. "Wasn't that terrible?" "What were they trying to say?" and "That was the most boring thing I've ever seen" were never phrases that appeared in the creative brief.) But if we set aside the messy issue of measuring breakthrough, we arrive at a cold and clinical question that post-game buzz cannot address. Chatter aside, did that flashy, cinematic, multimillion-dollar ad actually *do* anything for the brand? This, friends, is not a question of eyeballs. It's a matter of engagement—viewer engagement with a brand. You know, that thing the ad is supposed to do in the first place?

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The argument put forward every year is that it pays to reach a demo as huge and varied—by gender, income, profession, etc.—as the one tuned into the Super Bowl. And that argument appeals to advertisers who believe they can simultaneously "message" a shared audience. Got it. All true. Unfortunately, this logic says absolutely nothing about whether or not the message matters to those consumers, or whether it brought them closer to the brand in some meaningful way.

Which is why I maintain that advertisers who buy in the big game should hold the venue to a higher standard than the one they currently accept at the face value of big demo, big numbers. Brands that fail to use this very expensive moment in the sun to truly engage (rather than just entertain) are squandering both money and opportunity. Sure, many of the ads are funny—but a chuckle is *not* ROI. Entertainment should be the method, not merely the outcome.

Consider, too, that the cheap laugh ultimately does your brand few favors. The size of the Super Bowl base proportionately increases the odds that some humor will irritate (or, worse, alienate) some portion of your audience. Long is the list of brands that probably thought they were being clever, but mainly ended up being offensive—for making fun of mental illness (a GM robot that "killed" itself in 2007); for being racist (SalesGenie's Chinese-accented pandas from 2008); and for spreading homophobia (the 2007 Snickers ad featuring two men appalled over their accidental "kiss".)

Now, let's check the balance sheet. The $3 million price tag for a half-minute spot comes to about $100,000 a second. Ever notice that the brands who need exposure least are the ones who buy spots the most? And since the soda, snack, fast-food and beer brands that do most of the advertising during the game are, ironically, the very same soda, snack, fast-food and beer brands consumed in mass quantities *during* the game, one has to wonder: Is this their idea community outreach? Is a goofy ad for chips doing anything to differentiate the brand? And what of brands that dump their entire marketing budget on a 30-second bang? If the spot isn't well received, well, *then* what?

As I need not point out, these are tough economic times. It's been a long while since the economy was the No. 1 topic at American dinner tables. Brands that indulge in conspicuous media consumption may well turn off consumers long before those consumers turn off the game. This is especially true if the advertiser's company happens to be pink-slipping the average Americans who are now relegated to drowning their sorrows in off-brand beer while watching their tax dollars bail out GM. (Which, by the way, has wisely elected not to advertise in the game this year.)

If any of the points above apply to your brand, pouring millions into the Super Bowl may just be God's way of telling you that you have too much money in the marketing budget. Believe me, the folks in procurement (who, by the way, know where your desk is) will be happy to find another use for it.

Robert Passikoff runs New York-based consultancy Brand Keys.