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## Ads should create Super buzz despite economy

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By Teresa F. Lindeman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Steelers' safety Troy Polamalu will star in a Coke Zero ad on Sunday that mimics Joe Greene's famous Coke commercial.

TAMPA, Fla. -- Super Bowl crowds packing the nation's living rooms this year may be eating a cheaper brand of hot dogs, keeping the thermostat low and looking for relief from frightening economic news. And they'll know advertisers are spending a mind-boggling \$3 million for 30 seconds of their time.

The buzz factor could bite back this year, and advertisers know it.

If General Motors had gone ahead with a Super Bowl ad, it's not a reach to envision handfuls of popcorn and sarcastic comments being tossed at TV screens across America. So, too, with FedEx, another regular Super Bowl sponsor taking a bye after cutting salaries and freezing 401(k) contributions.

"You can't get up in front of your workers and say, 'Pay cuts, layoffs and, oh, we're doing a Super Bowl ad,'" said Bob Horowitz, executive producer of an annual TV show featuring some of the best commercials shown during the big game over the years. This year's version is scheduled to air Saturday on CBS.

Despite the economy, consumers should still have plenty of commercials to talk about the next day, what with SoBe trying the first 3-D commercial and Coke Zero tapping into warm, fuzzy memories by putting Steelers favorite Troy Polamalu in a 2009 version of the popular Mean Joe Greene commercial of the late 1970s. (For a preview, visit <http://youtube.com/CokeZeroTroyPolamalu>.)

Papa John's is pulling one of those stunt promos, promising to sell pizzas for 25 cents if the opening kickoff of the game is returned for a touchdown. At least people are still watching then.

Even more than usual, consumers will judge companies based on whether or not they think an advertiser understands how bad things are, said Robert Passikoff, founder and

president of New York-based brand and consumer loyalty research firm Brand Keys.

Consumers may even be turned off by a show of conspicuous media consumption. "I think it's just come to a point where both the consumer and the advertiser and the agency understand that it's not the way it was five years ago."

Some messages are still right for this moment. Brand Keys' seventh annual survey around consumer engagement and the Super Bowl predicted advertisers such as Hyundai and Denny's would get a solid return.

Denny's restaurants are seen as a bargain play, said Dr. Passikoff. "It's essentially a price brand at a time when people are paying attention to price brands."

Hyundai, whose image has progressed from not-very-good inexpensive cars to pretty good inexpensive cars, is offering to buy cars back if people lose their jobs. Budweiser's Clydesdales may provide reassurance that some things haven't changed.

He's less convinced that Coke, which markets its products through so many venues, couldn't get the same boost through other marketing tools, but a company spokeswoman said the investment buys awareness and reinforces the brand's optimistic DNA. "With a brand like Coke that is easily affordable, it's not like we're asking you to make a huge investment," said Susan Stribling.

Audi is trying to accelerate as others cut back. "We are aware of the economic climate, and we are maintaining our marketing strategy because the demand exists and the interest in our brand has never been higher. We've certainly felt the effects of the economy, but overall our brand is in a strong place," said Scott Keogh, chief marketing officer for Audi of America, in an e-mailed response.

Meanwhile, Mr. Horowitz and his TV show are trying to politely usher Mean Joe Greene off to some Super Bowl hall of fame for commercials. After six years of being voted the favorite of viewers, the spot may be retired -- from the voting anyway.

If Mr. Polamalu's spot can become a new fan favorite, that would make both Coke and Mr. Horowitz happy.

Actually, Coke officials are already feeling good. When they shot the spot in November, they didn't know the Steelers would be in the big game. And, not to choose sides or anything, but Ms. Stribling said the Steelers won the year the Mean Joe spot came out.

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