

## Super Bowl advertisers seek balance

Given economic pain facing Americans, Super Bowl ads may seek balance

By Allison Linn

Senior writer

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With tens of millions of Americans watching and millions of dollars on the line, the Super Bowl is already one of the most high-stakes moments of the year for American advertisers.

This year, the risks are even greater, as advertisers grapple with how to strike the right tone for an audience stung by the worst recession in decades, and yet perhaps not wanting to be hammered by that reality on Super Bowl Sunday.

"There's going to be even more scrutiny than usual," said Tim Calkins, clinical professor of marketing with Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, and a longtime follower of Super Bowl advertising.

In addition to striking a tone that doesn't offend viewers, experts say advertisers need to produce a spot that appears to justify the high cost of advertising during the Super Bowl at a time when workers are losing their jobs and shareholders are seeing their investments diminish.

A 30-second spot reportedly will cost \$3 million this year, meaning advertisers will pay as much per second as many Americans would be happy to earn in a year.

"You've got these brands that indulge in what can only be called conspicuous media consumption," said Robert Passikoff, president of the consulting firm Brand Keys.

While spending a huge amount of money on a humorous new ad may make sense in a good economy, Passikoff thinks it could be a mistake at a time when many people are worried about paying the bills, and companies are watching their budgets extremely closely.

"Entertaining people is fine, but a laugh is not a return on investment," Passikoff said.

Some longtime Super Bowl advertisers have decided to opt out entirely this year, perhaps because they don't want to appear ostentatious or because they simply don't have the money. Those include beleaguered carmaker GM and shipping company FedEx.

For those who are advertising, experts say the challenge will be to entertain people during breaks in the matchup between the Arizona Cardinals and the Pittsburgh Steelers while not sounding too flippant or over-the-top.

"I definitely think the economy is going to have an impact on the type of message, the tone of the message itself," said William Madway, an instructor of marketing at Villanova University. "You have to address consumers and what their current mind-set is."

Madway also thinks advertisers will be less likely to take huge risks this year. That's partly because advertisers don't want to appear extravagant in tough times. But they also may want to avoid spending money on something that might backfire and need to be pulled.

Two years ago, for example, Snickers was forced to bench a Super Bowl ad featuring two men accidentally kissing after [complaints that it was homophobic](#).

Passikoff believes the advertisers who are most successful will be the ones that do seem to offer folks a good value in this economy. Those include Denny's, whose ad touting its Grand Slam breakfast is slated to end with a surprise offer, and Hyundai, whose lineup includes an ad touting its promise to buy back a new car if its owner loses his or her job.

Nevertheless, most advertisers are expected to aim for that Super Bowl staple — making people laugh. Calkins thinks it would be ideal to find a way to give people a much-needed dose of humor while also recognizing the difficult economy. But he admits that's a tough job, and that's why many advertisers may not even try.

"It's very hard to figure out exactly how one would address (the economy)," Calkins said. "It is much safer, in a

way, to stick with the tried-and-true formula of a lot of humor and a lot of more entertaining spots.”

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