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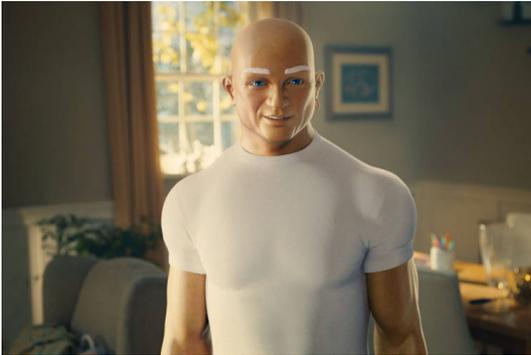
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MEDIA & MARKETING

## Super Bowl Ads Split Between Humor and Unity

Light spots provide respite while weightier commercials reflect serious themes in a divisive time



A Mr. Clean spot proved popular among ad executives and consumers surveyed by The Wall Street Journal. PHOTO: PROCTER & GAMBLE

By SUZANNE VRANICA

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A sexy Mr. Clean, a sloppy Terry Bradshaw, and a pot-seeking Snoop Dogg all featured in the Super Bowl commercials that scored big with marketing experts, in a year when weighty ads on political and social themes were also on full display.

Procter & Gamble Co. aired a spot featuring an animated version of the decades-old icon for its multipurpose household cleaner, Mr. Clean, dancing, thrusting and mopping as a woman looks on with pleasure. It was a clear winner among advertising executives and consumers surveyed by The Wall Street Journal.

“They took an old ad icon and made it fun again,” said Courtney Cotrupe, managing director at Partners + Napier.

Another acclaimed ad from the consumer-product giant promoted Tide detergent by showing sports TV analyst and former star quarterback Terry Bradshaw enduring a social-media shaming for getting a stain on his shirt. (Mr. Bradshaw wore a stained shirt during the live Fox broadcast before the ad ran.)

“The Tide ad was really funny and the casting was really good,” said Juliana Stancampiano, a 38-year-old in Seattle, Wash.

“It’s funny, topical and great casting,” said Wendy Lurrie, managing director at Gyro.

Funny ads always tend to do well, and this year they may have been just what many viewers were looking for—a respite from the divisive political climate, ad executives said.

“People need an escape right now,” said Pete VonDerLinn, executive creative director at Partners + Napier.

For marketers, striking the right note with Super Bowl commercials is critical. The big game reaches more than 100 million viewers. Companies shelled out up to \$5 million for

## Super Bowl Commercials 2017

Watch and vote for the best Super Bowl ads



30 seconds of ad time this year, more than double the price of 10 years ago, according to ad tracker Kantar Media.

Not every advertiser appearing during the National Football League title game where the New England Patriots defeated the Atlanta Falcons in overtime, went for the funny bone.

Several companies tackled heavier topics, venturing into potentially controversial political and social territory or advocating for unity in these divisive times.

During the pregame, Coca-Cola Co. aired “It’s beautiful,” a 2014 Super Bowl ad that highlighted America’s diversity by showing people from various ethnicities and lifestyles singing “America the Beautiful” in several languages.

“I loved that spot, it sends a nice message,” said Jane Shedlin, an 83-year-old in Riviera Beach, Fla.

“The ad had nice intentions but I am not really interested in a political message during the game” said Dan White, a 45-year-old from Rowley, Mass. “I am looking for more humor in the commercials,” he added.

A commercial for building-supply chain 84 Lumber Co., which features a Spanish-speaking mother and daughter on a journey—apparently toward the U.S. border—was clearly polarizing, ad executives said.

The spot directed viewers to a special website where the rest of the ad was available. The video showed the pair making it to the border and finding a wall had been erected. But the two were able to cross because the wall had a big door that opened.



Celebrity ads included an environmentally themed spot for Kia Motors featuring Melissa McCarthy hugging trees and rescuing rhinos. PHOTO: KIA MOTORS

“Even President Trump has said there should be a ‘big beautiful door in the wall so that people can come into this country legally,’” said Maggie Hardy Magerko, 84 Lumber’s president, in a statement. “It’s not about the wall. It’s about the door in the wall. If people are willing to work hard and make this country better, that door should be open to them.”

Some ad executives praised the company for being brave enough to tackle the issue of immigration.

“Many will be violently against the message and other will be more positive,” said Ed Cotton, chief strategy officer of Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners.

“It was a provocative ad but I liked it” because it showed a different view of immigrants, said Charlie Fisher, a 26-year-old from Toronto, Canada. Mr. Fisher tried to watch the rest of the ad online, but the site had crashed.

Even ads that weren’t intended to make a political statement might provoke debate. Anheuser-Busch InBev NV’s Budweiser spot showed the company’s co-founder immigrating from Germany to St. Louis in 1857.

The world’s largest brewer released its ad online just days after Mr. Trump signed an executive order suspending immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations for what the administration said were concerns about terrorism. (Federal courts have temporarily blocked the order pending a legal battle.)

In the six days after its release on Jan. 31, the Budweiser ad, as of early Sunday, had generated over 57,000 comments on social media—about 17% of them negative and 14% positive, according to research firm Networked Insights. While some people praised the iconic brand for “taking a political stance,” others wished that Budweiser “had not focused on the subject of immigration” and instead featured the Clydesdales or puppies, the research firm said.

“It’s a great ad, but it seems unlikely that people will interpret the ad as being about the heritage of the beers as opposed to being a politically motivated jab,” said Cedric Devitt, chief creative officer of digital ad firm Big Spaceship.

“It’s so relevant to what is going on today, and the ad makes me want to drink Budweiser,” said Alicia Mandel-Hickey, 52-year-old in Phoenix.

A spot for Volkswagen’s Audi that showed a father watching his daughter competing in a cart race and promoted gender pay equity also touched off controversy in the days leading up to the Super Bowl.

One spot managed to subtly tie into politics but in a very clever way. It’s A 10 Haircare, a hair-care brand, aired a funny commercial that poked fun at President Donald Trump’s hair. The ad showed a montage of really bad hairdos as a voice-over chimed: “America, we’re in for at least four years of awful hair. So it’s up to you to do your part by making up for it with great hair.”

“It was very funny,” said Laurie Lee, 53-year-old in Boston, Mass. “It lightened the mood and we need that.”

Beyond the fees for airtime, marketers spent millions more on special effects, well-known directors and celebrities.

This year John Malkovich pitched for website maker Squarespace Inc.; Lady Gaga promoted Tiffany & Co.; LeBron James plugged Sprite; and Patriots star Rob Gronkowski, who is injured, appeared in two different spots.

Honda Motor Co.’s ad showing high school yearbook pictures of celebrities such as Tina Fey and Robert Redford coming to life was selected as one of the best celebrity commercials of the night.

“A unique way to use celebrities,” said Ms. Cotrupe at Partners + Napier.

Other winning celebrity ads included an environmentally themed spot for Kia Motors Corp. featuring Melissa McCarthy hugging trees and rescuing rhinos and a spot for T-Mobile US Inc. showing Martha Stewart playing on words with Snoop Dogg. The rapper refers to the carrier’s unlimited data plan as “all that and a bag of—” and Ms. Stewart completes his sentence with a string of cannabis puns.

“Martha and Snoop have great chemistry,” said Susan Cantor, chief executive officer of branding firm Red Peak.

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