

Adding The Voice Of The Customer Back Into Our Ads

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Super Bowl ads today feel like missives from another age—one-way, broadcast-style marketing. The crop this year was a heady cocktail of nostalgia and fantastical absurdism with a heavier-than-usual reliance on celebrity cameos. And, like all ads, they relied on a particular set of strategies to reach consumers. One of the principal ones shared by most traditional ads is called interpellation.

Articulated most memorably by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, interpellation comes from political theory and is simply a mode of address that turns us from free individuals into subjects (he was writing mostly about repressive governments). The big idea here is that throughout our lives, when we are addressed in a certain way, we perform that role. I once gave a presentation at a university where I showed the State of the Union speech and counted the different ways in which the president addressed Americans (alternately as patriots, soldiers, activists, proud capitalists, etc.). In the same way, advertisers address consumers as particular types of subjects based on their best research about consumers' functional, social and emotional needs.

How Did The Super Bowl Ads Interpellate Us?

So, what did this year's Super Bowl ads reveal about what advertisers think about consumers? Quite a bit. One of the main ways they addressed viewers was around the need for return. The heavy lean on nostalgia and aging celebrities deployed by T-Mobile, Paramount+ and countless other brands was definitely comfort food for people, especially older millennials and Gen Xers wistful for simpler times. These ads were about reassurance and continuity at a time when things seem unstable. For example, T-Mobile's Bradley Cooper ad showed him with his mother—which represents a safe harbor for many people (a growing number of young adults are living with their parents, according to the Pew Research Center).

Another flurry of ads played to the tech-enabled solipsism of young people coming out of the pandemic and the ways in which digital spaces and real spaces have conflated. Video gaming reached a new peak during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, and global video gaming revenues are set to surpass \$211 billion in 2025. Both Squarespace's and Comcast Xfinity's ads took us into the minds of gamers, bending reality and showing us people whose cold affects and instincts for destruction seemed to hint at what a retreat into technology does to people. Tubi, General Motors and Netflix did something similar, except their ads were a nod to all the media consumption that took place during pandemic lockdowns. General Motors and Netflix's ad titled "Why not an EV?" features Will Ferrell in prestigious streaming shows, while Tubi's showed us listless people being interred into streaming media rabbit holes.

What Were The Ads Missing?

This year's Super Bowl ads, though terrifically entertaining and fascinating as sociological statements for future historians, don't really contain the full scope of the customer's voice. One of the great limitations of traditional ads is that they reflect the best guesses about what consumers are thinking without giving them a chance to respond. American sentiments are actually much more nuanced. Yes, people are weary, but they're also inspired and energized as evinced by the social movements that have galvanized our country—Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, the transgender rights movement and environmentalism, to name a few. Agencies don't always spot agency—the feeling of control and confidence—flourishing in our communities.

To illustrate, a researcher named Amy Clausen devised a fascinating experiment with 16- to 18-year-olds where she allowed them to "talk back" to ads. Featured in the book *Pop Culture and Power: Teaching Media Literacy for Social Justice* by Dawn H. Currie and Deirdre M. Kelly, Clausen's strategy was described as "culture jamming," meaning "hacking" ads and "tweaking" messages. She presented her participants with ads from major brands and asked a series of probing questions: What social identity is being constructed? How does my social identity influence how I interpret the image? How is my social identity manipulated? For example, they looked at an American Apparel ad that featured a woman wearing a red bodysuit, heeled black shoes and knee-high black stockings. In hacking the ad, one young woman added a skirt and made the model stand "more upright," explaining: "I tried to make her standing upright just because that's a more empowered position."

Let's 'Culture Jam' Our Ads

I wonder what culture jamming would look like if we were able to talk back to the Super Bowl commercials. Take the Ben Affleck Dunkin' ad, where we see him working the drive-thru window and taking selfies with customers. One hack might have been to have him go from talking at people and asking to be recognized to asking them questions about their busy lives as they rush to put food in their bellies before heading to work. The comedy might have originated from the juxtaposition of Ben's life and theirs—the self-deprecating, out-of-touch celebrity confronted with the realities of regular working people. Similarly, Will Ferrell might have used his GM electric vehicle to escape both The Walking Dead zombie apocalypse and the ubiquity of media to do what driving is all about—enjoy open spaces and the rush of air. The Xfinity ad, if hacked by curious, engaged gamers, might have turned the tables and shown them the terror and beauty of real interstellar travel (imagine those teens facing real solar flares and supernovas).

Is there a way we could embed the (often dissenting) voice of the customer into these commercials to make them resonate even more? Pondering these contrapuntal versions might be a good exercise for advertisers—a way for us marketing professionals to open up our ads conceptually and go from the hermetic to the human. I'm convinced it would only make for a better jam.

Tags: Voice, Ads