Super Bowl Buzzkill: Lessons From Nationwide's Infamous Dead Boy Ad

The Super Bowl is an advertiser's biggest opportunity to reach a massive audience. But at roughly $267,000 per second, brands rarely take any risks or depart from expected norms of humor, celebrity cameos, and dazzling visuals.

A handful, however, have used their time to deliver contentious messages—84 Lumber took on President Trump's border wall in 2017, for example. And in 2010, Focus on the Family ran an ad in which Tim Tebow's mother expressed her gratitude for carrying her pregnancy to term, referencing abortion without saying it.

But when it comes to making audiences squirm, few spots can compete with Nationwide Insurance's 2015 "The Boy Who Couldn't Grow Up"—better known by many as "the dead boy ad." Over a decade later, it's worth revisiting the fallout.

In the 30-second spot, a cute young boy laments all the rites of passage he'd never get to experience: learning to ride a bike, having his first kiss, traveling the world. It's not until the end of the ad that the boy reveals why he missed out on so much: "I couldn't grow up because I died in an accident," he said, apparently from the grave.

It was a needle-scratch heard 'round the world, or at least among the 114 million people watching the game. The blowback was swift and widespread.

"Nationwide just ruined the Super Bowl," actor John Francis

Daley tweeted at the time. ESPN's NFL Insider Dan Graziano wrote: "No one in the Nationwide advertising meeting put up their hand and went, 'Let's sleep on this?'"

ADWEEK sampled some of the online ire at the time, including one commenter who shared: "We're Nationwide Insurance! EVERYONE DIES. Enjoy the game!"

Nationwide claimed it had sound reasons for the ad, even if the results didn't translate.

As ADWEEK reported in 2014, when Matt Jauchius took the CMO job in 2010, he faced the task of competing with Aflac's duck and Geico's gecko. These competitors had proven that humor could sell insurance, but opting for an animal mascot (a "yuk and a hard laugh," as Jauchius termed it) would have made Nationwide an also-ran.

He had already debuted the "Join the Nation" slogan to signal the company virtues of reliability and diversity. "We're trying to change the tone and conversation of the insurance category," he told ADWEEK.

The 2015 Super Bowl ad was a bid to make consumers aware of preventable household injuries—the leading cause of childhood fatality—and to promote the company's new "Make Safe Happen" website, a microsite dedicated to safety for kids.

But the message didn't suit the occasion.

"While some did not care for the ad," Nationwide said in a statement after the game, "we hope it served to begin a dialogue to make safe happen for children everywhere." However important that conversation was, Americans didn't want to have it on Super Bowl night.

"It was too depressing for the Super Bowl," said Sol Marketing founder and CEO Deb Gabor. "What we're used to in the Super Bowl is snack foods, beer commercials, talking frogs—stuff

like that. So it was a little bit too dark.”

Insurance industry voices thought much the same. As Insurance Journal commented: “Childhood death is apparently not a conversation people want during Super Bowl parties.”

Viewers also didn’t appreciate what they saw as a scare tactic, and one that struck particular terror into the hearts of new parents.

“It’s one thing to use a tragic event, such as the death of a child, to highlight an issue like gun control—it’s quite another to use it to sell something and promote your brand,” said Steve Marino, chief creative officer for independent ad shop Aloysius Butler & Clark.

“Consumers are smarter than sometimes brands give them credit for,” Gabor added. “A lot of people perceived [the ad] to be just manipulative guilt marketing.”

In fairness, while 64% of viewers didn’t like the ad, 12% did, according to data from ad tech firm Nexxen. And Nationwide stated that “thousands” of consumers visited its Make Safe Happen site.

But Nationwide hasn’t returned to the Big Game since.

Recommended videos
https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/super-bowl-buzzkill-lessons-from-nationwides-infamous-dead-boy-ad/