

YouTube Pitches Advertisers on Marketing Beyond Tentpole Events at Upfront

YouTube is on the edge of glory.

The social and video sharing platform ended the 2025 TV upfront week with its annual Brandcast—and this one was especially important for the company, given that it was celebrating its 20th anniversary. For this year's annual event, YouTube brought together creators like MrBeast, Brittany Broski, Casey Neistat, and Hot Ones host Sean Evans, while also showcasing musical performances from Alex Warren and Lady Gaga at the David Geffen Hall in Lincoln Center.

Throughout the presentation, YouTube spent a lot of time going down memory lane, reminding advertisers and guests about some of the creators and videos—think Chocolate Rain, Charlie the Unicorn, Leave Britney Alone—that made an impact on the platform. In addition, the company explored how advertisers can get their message to surround cultural moments and live beyond tentpole events.

ADWEEK's upfront postmortem chats have covered NBCUniversal, Fox, Amazon, TelevisaUnivision, Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, and Netflix. Now, for our final postmortem, Sean Downey, president of Americas and global partners at Google, spoke to ADWEEK about how the 20th anniversary celebration came together, YouTube's messaging to buyers while navigating uncertainty during negotiations, and why he wants brands to go *gaga* for their offerings.

ADWEEK: Congratulations on making it through another Brandcast. What were you most excited about and proud of?

Downey: We had a full house. Everyone was excited to be there. Everyone had a lot of energy, and we got to showcase the total YouTube experience. That was the most important thing. We always tell them—I ended this way—there's only one YouTube, and we tried to show that. It was our 20th anniversary, so we want to celebrate that. That was a testament to the platform that's evolved for two decades, and we wanted to showcase that. It is the epicenter of culture. You could see all the varied voices resonate.

The 20th anniversary is a huge milestone for YouTube. Can you talk about how that all came together?

We were very thoughtful about showcasing all sides of it. Even when talking to advertisers, we talk about having the YouTube experience, and that's got a bunch of areas. I had five core pillars that we focused on: streaming, sponsorships, shopping, social, and AI. We tried to take some of our history from each of those, or some of the newness from each of those, and demonstrate them.

When you're talking about streaming and what makes YouTube popular, you have to highlight the biggest stars. You have to bring MrBeast, and it's great to bring Sean Evans because they are the epitome of the new Hollywood. They're what built this platform, and having them there for the 20th anniversary was important to us. Then, you want to showcase how it's driving cultural experiences. Having somebody like Brittany Broski host it in that style, which is so popular for how people come for information or entertainment. They're watching podcasts and shows all the time on YouTube—having that run the show

versus just being a straight stream was important to us because we could showcase the interactivity that YouTube has as a platform.

Ahead of the TV upfront season, there was a lot of talk about “uncertainty” and “flexibility,” especially given the concerns around tariffs. Has that impacted negotiations at all?

We’ve worked in uncertain times a lot. YouTube’s been around for 20 years. Google’s been around for 25 years, and we’ve navigated uncertain waters with clients through various periods at that time. Different companies are always in different positions, even in certain times, so the focus we have with them is, “What are you trying to solve for? What’s your objective? How can we help make YouTube work for you?” Because if we’re helping them grow, they’re always going to invest in us.

Our conversations leading up to Broadcast have been really good. There’s a lot of interest and demand for YouTube inventory, and people have showcased that. Then we’ll see what it looks like throughout the summer because they go around to all the shows and they learn about the content. They see what’s interesting to them. They try and understand what the options are for them. They talk to their colleagues, and then they start figuring out how they’re gonna allocate money.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell isn’t a stranger to the YouTube Broadcast stage. He made his first appearance a few years ago to announce NFL Sunday Ticket and came out again this year to speak more about the extended partnership between YouTube and the NFL. How important is it to continue highlighting sports to marketers?

Roger is a three-time attendee. He's like part of the staff now, pretty much. But obviously, sports are a huge part of the YouTube platform. Views of sports-related content have tremendous watch time growth rates on our platform. I think it's over 30%, and buyers definitely like live sports. They make that clear. They especially love the NFL. The NFL always drives strong viewership. We enjoy our partnership with the NFL. We were going into Year Three. We obviously have Sunday Ticket on YouTube. We have a lot of the shoulder content of creators going into the locker room.

What we love about sports and what we love about it on YouTube is where we can bridge the event and the culture around it, and we find that's what advertisers love the most on YouTube. We can put NFL games on, but then we can put IShowSpeed, or Destroying, or Halle Bailey in the environment around the game and talk about the benefit of it. You can put a Kelce's brother podcast around the game, and it's 24/7, while a game is three hours. So we love the ability to have the right amount of live content. We're excited about the NFL game with the right amount of culture around it. Mix is magic for advertisers.

How are you building sponsorships around content?

We announced at our presentation that when we're talking to advertisers, we're asking about, "How do you advertise in the moment?" and "What are you building around it in your activation?" That's why sponsorships was such a big highlight for us because you can really build strategy around an event versus just advertising it.

[Mary Ellen Coe, YouTube chief business officer,] showed the golf [example] on the screen. You can see the difference between just advertising in the tournament versus a buy on Bryson [DeChambeau's] channel. Whenever he has a Drop 50 episode, it has a tremendous amount of coverage. You could see the work that they did to create and customize content. Then

you can start to advertise at scale using the AI tools to those same audiences that have shown interest on the platform. We think that is the magic formula. There are a lot of sports fans who spend way more time watching non-game content than game content, and we want advertisers to reach both.

Lady Gaga closed Brandcast, but throughout the presentation, there was a lot of mention of how she's been such a big part of the YouTube brand. Why was she the artist that you felt made sense to celebrate the 20th anniversary?

First of all, she was amazing. She was fantastic. There are a couple of areas that make her appealing on YouTube. She *is* the YouTube experience. She's one of the original artists that learned how to leverage and build a fandom on digital platforms. She was obviously big on YouTube—creating videos and launching her career. If you think back, you can remember all the Little Monsters in the Get Ready With Me videos to get ready for concerts. She has built a great fandom and culture around her music, her content, and that's what YouTube's about. It's having a talented, authentic artist having a personal connection to fans and building their career and communities out of it. She demonstrates that well.

Will you be back next year, and if so, what would you do differently?

When you finish planning, you always start planning. I don't know what we'll do. We're really happy with this event. The response before, during, and after was great. So we know we're going to continue. The question is what we will do—and it always surprises me what we end up doing. We did the red carpet this year before for some of the creators—and we have never done that before.

It's too soon to say what we'll do next. We know we have a lot of demand from people that want to come, so we'll consider that and figure out how we can include more people. But for

now, we're just trying to get the feedback and see what we want to change. But we were happy with the flow of the show. We thought it was our best ever.

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