

# Lessons That Sports Marketers, And Everyone, Should Have Learned From The 2020 Super Bowl As We Approach The 2021 Game

*Arthur Solomon*



As usual, there are many lessons for sports marketers and their communications arms to consider after a Super Bowl – the National Football League’s really big overly-hyped, overly-expensive advertising and publicity gimmick and overly-hyped football game. But the 2020 game added a new tutorial that I call the “Robert Burns Effect.”

Burns, as I’m sure everyone in the communications business knows, because they all majored in English, instead of easy PR, marketing or advertising courses, (*sarcasm intended*), is the legendary Scottish poet famous for his “To a Mouse,” which contains the lines, “The best-laid schemes o’ *Mice* an’ *Men* Gang aft agley.” (*All you PR majors who never took a lit course know what the translation to English is because it’s famous. Right?*)

Several days prior to last year’s Super Bowl, the tragic death of Kobe Bryant provided important lessons that sports

marketers, ad agencies and PR practitioners should always remember: Like the mouse in the Burns poem that failed to find shelter from the December winds, one unexpected event can cause disarray among sports marketing plans.

Feared of being labeled insensitive because of Bryant's death, some marketers hurriedly announced changes to their Super Bowl promotions. Ad Age reported that some Super Bowl advertisers paused their marketing efforts in the wake of Bryant's

death. Several brands, including Procter & Gamble's Olay held back making public its Super Bowl creative. Planters, whose Super Bowl campaign centered on the death of its spokescharacter Mr. Peanut, also said it was pausing all campaign activities following the news, reported. Jeanine Poggi, Ad Age's senior editor, on January 27 (2020). In addition, on January 30, Nat Ives reported in his CMO TODAY Wall Street Journal column that marketers had to make cuts and edits in their commercials.

Another lesson deals with using sports stars as endorsers. After the initial shock of Bryant's tragic death, and stories portraying him as the greatest thing since the National Football League was founded, (*yes, I know he was a basketball player but this is a football column*) the media delved into Bryant's past, and revived facts about him that basketball junkies and sports marketers would rather not read – his attitude toward others and, more important, a sexual assault charge, even though he seemed to be a changed person, giving back, as he aged.

The Bryant coverage was not unusual. It is now standard practice of most print journalists to tell the entire story about a sports star and not cover up their blemishes, as was the practice years ago when I was a sports writer. But, alas, coming clean about an athlete's unsportsmanlike conduct is likely not to be heard from game day TV or radio commentators,

especially game analysts who knew or played with the tarnished athletes. As Michael Powell wrote in his January 28, (2020) New York Times column, referring to Bryant being accused of sexually assaulting a young women in 2003, "Relatively few in the news media or basketball did themselves proud, and you are left to wonder if Bryant would have survived in a #MeToo age of awareness." And a January 30 Wall Street Journal article said, "Bryant's case never went to trial, but ended with him apologizing to his accuser "for my behavior that night." Bryant had said the encounter was consensual, but his apology and subsequent silence about the details of the case left lingering questions about what happened. (The criminal case was dropped in 2005, when he settled with the woman.)

In his CMO TODAY Wall Street Journal column on January 29, Nat Ives led with, "Good morning. Americans are not looking forward to the presidential campaign ads coming to the Super Bowl on Sunday. President Trump and Michael Bloomberg are each planning minute-long commercials during the game, but 63% of Americans call the Super Bowl an inappropriate platform for political ads, according to a poll by Morning Consult for CMO Today. It's not a partisan issue, either: Republicans aren't interested in seeing the president's ad during the game, and Democrats would rather not see Mr. Bloomberg's. They may be a good idea anyway, given the extra attention that viewers pay to Super Bowl ads, marketing professor Aimee Drolet told me. Even if folks are annoyed at the time, their memory will be enhanced and they are more likely to retrieve the arguments these ads make, she said. The irritation fades quicker than their memory."

If there was any doubt which of the two political commercials would receive greater news coverage it was decided a few days prior to the game, when it was announced that the Bloomberg ad would take on gun control.

Prior to the 2020 game, Ad Age reported on several aspects regarding the efficacy of Super Bowl commercials that

marketers should consider. The most important one was to have an after-the-game program, meaning that the cost of a \$5.6-million 30 second commercial, not including production and talent fees, which can add several additional millions to the price, is not enough to do its job, and even after the additional spending it might not bring the results marketers wanted.

## **Disproving That Any Publicity Is Good Publicity**

There were four “big hit” articles about the Super Bowl, to use a term loved by TV football game announcers, that I saw prior to the coin toss of the 2020 game, two in the January 31 New York Times; another in its February 2 edition; the other in the February 1 Wall Street Journal:

**The Times:** One, in the business section, was headlined “These Brands have Better Uses for Money Than a Super Bowl Ad.” A few key points: Commercials messages lost in the clutter of other ads; the exposure gained by advertising during the game is not worth the cost, and marketers can learn a lot more information about consumers who click on online ads than by those who watch them on TV.

The second story was a full page article titled, “It’s Flawed. It’s Ugly. It’s Beautiful.” It had three of the Times’ culture journalists opining why 100 million people still watch the game. Early in the print discussion, it was pointed out that people watch the game despite its ugly side – brain diseases caused by repeated head hits, not only by concussions, which the NFL tried to cover up, the domestic abuse problems by some players and racial aspects associated with the NFL.

The third Times’ article was a continuation of its “football’s hold on America” series. It chronicled how three Miami Dolphin players from their undefeated 1972 team – Earl Morrall, Bob

Kuechenberg and Bill Stanfill had chronic traumatic encephalopathy. (C.T. E.), the degenerative brain disease associated with repeated head trauma. It said that another Dolphin star, Nick Buoniconti, who died in July, 2019, and suffered from dementia, wanted his brain donated to Boston University's C.T.E. center, the leading research facility into chronic traumatic encephalopathy degenerative brain disease linked to repeated hits to the head. The article also told how other members of the team developed other health problems at a younger age than the general population, according to a 2011 study published in the American Neurological Association's Annals of Neurology.

**Wall Street Journal:** The Journal article, under the headline, "The Cloud Hanging Over the Super Bowl," said, "Amid all the escapism, it will be interesting to see how much reality seeps into the proceedings. There's plenty of it. The Chiefs have faced domestic violence issues the past couple years, including a case involving one of their most crucial stars, receiver Tyreek Hill. And of course, the last time the 49ers were in the Super Bowl, in 2013, Colin Kaepernick was the quarterback. A good bet would be an over/under on how many times he is mentioned on Sunday. I'll take the under. (*That marketers continue to shrug off stories like these that are published by the hundreds each year underscores their true nature – as long as their product sells, or they think it sells from sports associations, anything goes. Some of these same marketers are "proud sponsors" of international sporting events, like the Olympics, that are awarded to totalitarian governments and used as propaganda tools.*)

Also, The New York Times, which year-round publishes articles regarding the negative health aspects from playing tackle football, with most of the articles in the paper appearing as the Super Bowl becomes closer, didn't wait that long in 2020. On February 15, a lengthy column by Michael Powell told the story of a young college football player who killed himself

because he feared he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (C.T.E.), which scientists who examined his brain confirmed. After looking up the symptoms of C.T.E. the 21-year-old shot himself.

And a full page article on August 26, detailed that former Black players sued the NFL for discriminating against them when deciding the amount of money an individual receives from the 2013 concussion settlement case.

A lengthy Washington Post Magazine article on September 20, 2020, by Patrick Hruby said, "Scientists believe that repetitive brain trauma – not just concussions, but also less severe subconcussive blows like the hits football linemen absorb on every snap – is a precondition for CTE. Last year, Boston University researchers found that for football players, both the risk of developing the disease and its severity increase with the number of years playing the sport; athletes whose youth-to-pro careers lasted more than 14.5 years were 10 times as likely to have CTE as those who played fewer." The article also reported that the NFL, which now admits damage to brains can occur from hits to the head, for many years denied that it was so.

As the date of the 2021 Super Bowl drew closer, so did the news articles regarding the health dangers to players.

A New York Times story on January 19, chronicled the story of two NFL quarterbacks knocked out of their divisional playoff games with concussion-like symptoms, with one broadcast analyst asking why are the rules against head-to-head contact not being enforced in the playoff games. The article also said, "Many concussions, though, go unreported, either because doctors and neurologists at the game failed to spot them or because the players masked their symptoms."

The NFL has forever attempted to put a good face on its problems, ranging from originally denying that hits to the

head would cause brain damage to finding reasons to excuse players for their anti-social behavior and breaking Covid-19 rules. There's a Yiddish word "chutzpah," one of whose meanings is gall, and that's what I think of the NFL inviting Covid-19 workers as guests to the 2021 Super Bowl, given its history of denying the health hazards of the game. Question: Could the fact that only a limited number of paying fans will be permitted to attend the game have anything to do with the NFL's decision?*(Reminds me of the joke about the youngster that kills his parents and then pleads for mercy because he is an orphan.)*

## **Circumventing The Big Price Tag**

Mega events – sports and none sports – are an easy target for clever ambush marketers and on, January 31, Ad Age reported that, "PETA seems to be up to its old tricks again. The organization was trending earlier today after it posted a tweet saying Fox banned its ad featuring animals taking a knee while the National Anthem plays to show solidarity with Colin Kaepernick. It's a move PETA has made countless times around the Super Bowl: the organization creates an ad that has no chance of being shown on broadcast TV and then getting irate when it gets rejected."

## **More Important Than The Winning Team**

The most important part of a Super Bowl to the publics that really matter, the advertising community, TV networks and sport marketers (without whom the Big Game would be just another Small Game), is the reaction to the commercials by ad industry pundits; definitely more important than the game's winner.

Jeanine Poggi, Ad Age's senior editor, said, "This year (2020)

failed to produce very many commercial standouts. The desire to not provoke controversy and steer clear of anything divisive, resulted in bland ads that utilized recycled material and quite literally borrowed from each other.” *(Personal Observation: Bland Super Bowl ads are the norm rather than the exception.)*

No review of the Super Bowl would be complete without opining on the reaction of the sports/marketing/advertising writers, because without their pre-game hype journalism, the Super Bowl wouldn't be super.

Instead of just writing about their own impressions of the commercials, the ad/marketing writers reported the public's reaction to individual 2020 ads. Ridiculous. The game was watched by more than 102-million viewers, so any report on viewers' reactions reminds me of the 2016 polling that assured everyone of a Hillary Clinton victory.

But anyway, the following is what the self-anointed ad connoisseurs said about the popularity and effectiveness of the TV commercials: Ad Meter said the most popular ad was the Jeep commercial; You Tube said it was the Amazon ad; Twitter's Brand Bowl crowned Google's ad as the most popular; Salesforce said that President Trump's commercial received 75.6 percent positive reactions, but Ad Meter voters ranked the same ad last. Ipsos said the Doritos commercials had the most emotional effect, based on measuring the reactions of 40 people out of an audience of more than 102-million viewers; however, a similar measurement by Unruly said the most effective ad was one by Google. *(Is a puzzlement? “as Yul Brynner said in Broadway's “The King and I”)*

Alexandra Barasch an assistant professor at the New York University Stern School of Business, said, “...with so little agreement over how to measure effectiveness and impact, every one can find some way to claim success and advance their own interests.” Other marketing pros have often said that the



results from a Super Bowl ad did not justify the cost of a commercial.

**Writer's Note:** – *The information in the above two paragraphs was taken from a February 6, 2020, New York Times article by Tiffany Hsu.*

## **The N.F.L. Hype Allies**

The sports writing community in 2020 did what too many of their craft still do. While covering up for athletes' misdeeds are mostly a thing of the past, hero-worshipping stories are still too common, as is pack journalism. The sameness of the torrent of after the game stories could have been predicted before the first writer punched in a letter on a keyboard: "A new dynasty is born;" "Patrick Mahomes is the new face of the NFL;" and "Nice Guy Andy Reid finally wins a Super Bowl." The PR staffs of the NFL and teams couldn't have written them better. *(The gods of journalism must be thankful for the New York Times' coverage of the N.F.L., whose reports include the warts of the game.)* Coincidentally, the same day the above stories appeared the Times published the obituary of Willie Woods, the Hall of Fame defensive back with the Green Bay Packers in the 1960s, who died the day after the Super Bowl. The article mentioned that he was diagnosed with dementia in 2006 and had undergone four major football-related operations.

## **Extra Points**

The 2020 half-time show, featuring Jennifer Lopez and Shakira, was most likely an anathema to the person who did the most to insert politics into sports, the twice impeached former President Trump. Its creative included symbolisms that only a liberal could like: Two Latin super stars featured in America's game, young backup singers performing behind metal bars that suggested the plight of the Dreamers, or maybe the children held in cages at the Southern border, and Lopez

draped in an American flag costume that reversed to a Puerto Rican flag. As usual, more viewers –103-million – watched the halftime performance than the game. Not even Mahomes' thrilling fourth quarter performance that catapulted Kansas City to a victory could match the moves of Shakira and J.Lo.

So now that the NFL has allowed a team to relocate in Las Vegas (after decades of saying the city is off limits), and has permitted some team owners to invest in betting companies, cynics might say that the league's new motto should be, "Flexibility is our name." Or maybe the league should dish its shield and replace it with \$\$\$ symbols, adorned with gold lettering saying, "Bet Responsibly, But Bet And Don't Forget To Drink." Because in its February 10-18, 2020, issue, the SportsBusiness Journal reported that the NFL is searching for a candidate for the new position of "vice president of sports betting." (*Suggestion: Limit the search to senior executives at Fidelity, Charles Schwab, Ameritrade, etc.*) On January 28, 2021, it reported, "The American Gaming Association (AGA) estimates that 26 million Americans will bet on Super Bowl LIV, up 15% from last year..., while about 5 million will place a bet on an online or mobile platform. The rest of the 26 million will bet with a bookie, in a pool or casually with family and friends." And on February 2, The New York Times reported, "Online gambling sites are offering can't-lose propositions, giving away easy money to attract new customers to a nascent multibillion-dollar industry. These come-ons should reach a peak just ahead of the Super Bowl."

At one time sports was positioned as bringing out the best in the American character and its performers, and the league commissioner's as protectors of that ideal, which was always a fairy tale promoted with the help of sports writers as everyone associated with the business of sports knows (as are the Halls of Fame). But because of relaxed betting rules, sports has contributed to a fast corrosion of American culture in a way that is now damaging to the well-being of people who

don't know a linebacker from a balk.

If there was one major take-a-way that sports marketers should learn from the 2020 Super Bowl, it's that participating in it is as likely to result in negative publicity as it is to gain positive coverage. But it doesn't matter. Because, unlike people associated with the advertising and PR agencies, the networks and the NFL, the game and the \$5-million plus commercials will be forgotten in a few days by people who have a life to live, and the marketers will have to devise other strategies to get consumers to care.

Of course, there were other important takeaways during 2020 directly related to the Big Game that marketers should have considered before automatically writing a check to advertise on the upcoming 2021 Super Bowl. They include the public's reactions to the unhealthy aspects of the game, the politics that are now ingrained in the game's DNA because of President Trump using it as a political football and most important, how the public will react to "fun" or "solemn" commercials, because by the time the game is played this year on February 7 nearly 500,000 Americans will have died in the U.S. from the coronavirus. Because of these and perhaps economic concerns, some past Super Bowl advertisers are sitting out this year's game. They include SodaStream, Sabra, and Avocados from Mexico, Pepsi, Coca-Cola and Hyundai, to mention a few that have decided to take a pass.

Budweiser, instead of running a drink and have fun commercial, in an attempt to be considered a "good corporate citizen," will provide the funds to help raise awareness of the benefits of getting the coronavirus vaccine. But don't be fooled.

They'll still be advertising their other products, including one for Bud Light and Michelob Ultra. A January 26 Wall Street Journal article about the decision included the following "The corporate spot, a first for Anheuser-Busch during the Super Bowl, will include Budweiser and other company brands. We

cannot talk about AB without Budweiser, said Marcel Marcondes, U.S. chief marketing officer at Anheuser-Busch, adding that the spot may even include Clydesdales." *(Sort of like, what are you going to believe, what we want you to believe or what you see?)*

Obviously, the Bud announcement was an attempt to obtain good publicity from a crisis that has thus far killed nearly 500,000 Americans. Unlike, Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg and Dolly Parton, who didn't make a big deal about their contributions to help fight the coronavirus pandemic, Bud decided to toast itself publicly for its decision. Joining Bud in this obvious crass publicity ploy was the NFL, (no surprise there), which all of a sudden discovered poetry by inviting Amanda Gorman, the young poet who gained sudden fame at President Joe Biden's inauguration with her reading of "The Hill We Climb." At the over-hyped football game, Miss Gorman will recite a new poem before the official coin toss recognizing an educator, a nurse, and a veteran for helping their communities during the coronavirus pandemic. Obviously, Bud and the NFL don't agree with another poet, Alexander Pope who wrote "Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame." in his "An Essay on Man."

Several days before the game, another Wall Street Journal advertising story, on January 27, mentioned that some companies are resorting to ambush marketing to create a Super Bowl tie-in, rather than spend the increasingly higher costs of nationally advertising on the game telecast. Two companies that were mentioned were GlaxoSmithKline PLC and Boston Beer. *(Despite the complaints of "official sponsors" of all mega sports events, ambush marketing efforts often receive the most free media coverage because of their cleverness. Ambush marketing has been around for a long time and is increasingly being used to circumvent the sky-high costs of becoming "official.")*

Unlike the missing brands sponsorships, one issue that will

remain will be the political affects on the NFL that were super glued on the league by the former president. Even though he is gone from office, ex President Trump and NFL football are still joined at the hip. In his closing days of office, the twice impeached president sought to gain some favorable publicity but was thwarted when New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick announced that he is declining the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

While the winner of the February 7 game and the efficacies of the commercials are not known as of this writing, one thing is certain:

People will be watching for racial justice protests by athletes in the upcoming Super Bowl and in future NFL games. And not even the NFL shield can prevent those protests from receiving major media coverage. Example: A Sports of The Times column on page one of the January 25 New York Times urged fans and football players not to forget Colin Kaepernick's willingness to destroy his career by protesting racism by kneeling during the national anthem., This season, many teams stayed off-the field during the playing of the anthem.

As I write this on February 2, thus far in my two "must reads," The New York Times and Wall Street Journal, and on TV newscasts, there has been less Super Bowl coverage than in the past. That's good, in my opinion. A sporting event should not dominate news coverage, especially this one that is a vehicle for TV commercials, even though I'm looking forward to seeing Dolly Parton make her Super Bowl debut in one.

Oh, before I forget. There was a football game last year. Kansas City defeated Miami, as if that matters to the marketers, the networks and the NFL. The score is unimportant, unless you bet the spread.

And there is also a game scheduled be played on February 7

this year between the Kansas City Chiefs and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

The winner might be important to fans not associated with the marketing of the Big Game.

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**About the Author:** Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr \(at\) juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com) or [artsolomon4pr@optimum.net](mailto:artsolomon4pr@optimum.net).