

AdAge

An analysis
of Super Bowl
ads reveals
how creativity
generates
maximum ROI

The power of creative: How ad quality improves ROI

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The power of creative: How ad quality drives ROI

Kantar's exclusive analysis of Super Bowl commercials reveals which creative elements of an ad generate maximum return on investment for brands

Why does one ad produce better returns than another?

Many brand teams would pin the success of an ad on media placement and spending levels. Especially in today's digital-first media environment, with easily available metrics and measurement protocols in place, media spending tends to get disproportionate credit for advertising success.

Creative quality is generally not systematically measured nor included in these metrics. As many advertisers and their agencies have begun to max out their ability to optimize media mix and weight-related levers, long-term research from Kantar shows that creative accounts for half the ability to drive return on investment—and new artificial intelligence-fueled systems can predict creative effectiveness and enable higher ROI, providing metrics that can be added into measurement protocols.

Kantar's Link AI, built on the Link database that contains over 230,000 tests and more than 35 million human interactions, can reliably predict an ad's success within 15 minutes. And according to a Kantar study based on 1,400 TV ads of 270 brands across five categories (CPG, retail, insurance, technology and financial services) that ran from 2020 to 2021, advertisers saw an increase of 30% ROI when improving an ad's creative quality from "average" to "best."

The bottom line (so to speak): Ads are more than what they say; great creative depends on how you say it.

Guided by this ongoing research, Kantar has established creative best practices that can propel an ad's ROI. To illustrate those best

Advertisers saw a

3X

higher ROI when improving an ad's creative quality from "average" to "best."

practices and the difference great creative can make, even with the most effective media investment available, its team looked at ads in the biggest showcase of all: the Super Bowl.

Kantar analyzed the ads that ran during the 2021 and 2022 Super Bowl telecasts. That analysis demonstrates the ROI of great, thoughtful ads, and also looks at the elements of that creative effectiveness—and how those lessons can be applied to everyday advertising.

The key driver: brand equity

To some degree, measuring the success of an individual Super Bowl ad depends on the marketer's goals in making that one-of-a-kind investment. Those can range from driving brand awareness to creating social buzz to changing brand perceptions to launching a new product.

And in many ways, of course, the Super Bowl is completely different from any other possible media buy. Kantar's analysis shows that 77% of Super Bowl ads have high viewer involvement.

Top 10 ROI ads from Super Bowl LV

The ultimate success of the Super Bowl LVI ads is still to be determined. While star-studded spots from UberEats, Expedia, Toyota's Tundra and BMW generated the most buzz in the ad community and on social media, ad experts don't always get it right, at least in terms of how creative connects to sales success.

According to Kantar's Super Bowl LV 2021 Ad Effectiveness Report, these ads from last year's crop of commercials actually generated the most ROI for their brands. Included are snippets of Ad Age's creative reviews and star ratings, for comparison:

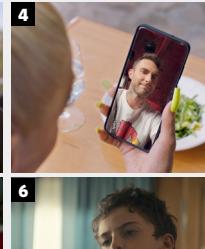
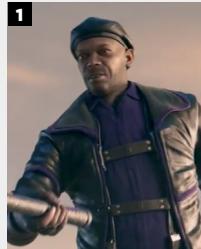
1. Verizon, "Can't Blame the Lag"

"This is a clever, unexpected piece that relies, in equal measures, on Samuel L. Jackson's star power, deft CGI animation and some sharp, darkly funny copywriting. The ad-gamers who pulled this off are among the best in the Big Game."

★★★★★

2. Mtn Dew, "Mtn Dew Major Melon Bottle Count"

"John Cena stars.... It's a fun idea—a sort of real-time Where's Waldo done at industrial scale—and it's got a built-in social activation: You enter by tweeting your count (or guess)." ★★★★★



3. T-Mobile, "Family Drama"

"This commercial with Anthony Anderson and his mom looks like it was fun to shoot. But when your ad needs a play-by-play, that's a sign it might be a wee bit overwritten."

★★★

4. T-Mobile, "Rockstar 5G"

"It's a funny conceit, and thanks to deft performances by Gwen Stefani, Adam Levine and Blake Shelton (who is obviously a good sport), it works—if you don't think about it too much."

★★★★★

5. General Motors, "No Way, Norway"

"Will Ferrell is in fine form—this is peak Ferrellian slapstick—and his easy comedic rapport with Kenan Thompson and Awkwafina make this non-sense narrative a daffy delight to watch."

★★★★★

6. Chipotle, "Can a Burrito Change the World?"

"We're left to wonder if Chipotle's market share will rise among precocious, eco-conscious boys who, improbably, care deeply about the ethical implications of supply-chain management and the future of the burrito-industrial complex."

★★★

7. Amazon Alexa, "Alexa's Body"

"The conceit of this ad, which has a female executive day-dreaming about what life would be like if Alexa lived inside the body of her celebrity crush Michael B. Jordan, is confusing from the get-go."

★★★★★

8. Toyota, "Upstream"

"Starring Paralympian Jessica Long, the spot is an elegant, quietly moving way for Toyota to call attention to its support of the Olympics—the announcer says the carmaker is a 'proud partner of Team USA'—and align its brand with optimism, perseverance and triumph over adversity."

★★★★★

9. Dexcom, "Rant"

"Is this amazing creative? Nope. But by deploying a likable celebrity—Nick Jonas—in a relatable, optimistic way, this spot admirably does its job with clarity and conviction."

★★★★★

10. Disney, "Get Your Stream on With the Disney Bundle"

"This straightforward 30-second Super Bowl spot for Disney's streaming bundle looks like basically every other ad for a streaming service you've ever seen."

★★★

“People are paying attention; to many, the ads are just as much part of the Super Bowl experience as the game and halftime show,” said Kerry Benson, VP, content analytics, at Kantar. “A high level of ad involvement is expected.”

Not only are the viewers ready to watch, but on the flip side, the analysis shows that virtually all Super Bowl ads are highly engaging.

But a highly engaging ad—even presented to this highly involved audience—does not automatically translate into solid returns for a brand. Kantar analysis shows that even a multi-million-dollar investment that gains access to that engaged viewership of 95 million consumers is not enough to guarantee the best results.

Super Bowl ads, on average, are 20 times more effective than a “normal” TV ad in affecting brand perceptions. But the key question for both Super Bowl ads and everyday ads: “At the end of the day, is the ad driving brand equity, and driving brand sales?” according to Alfredo Troncoso, partner, brand and marketing ROI, at Kantar. The difference between an average ad and a strong one—and the resulting ROI—is whether the ad drives brand equity. Over and over again, Kantar research shows brand equity is the key driver of a brand’s organic growth.

When Kantar looked at the set of last year’s Super Bowl ads, it found the average ROI was \$4 for each \$1 of spend. But some brands saw perceptions and ROI far exceeding the average, and some saw performance dramatically below that benchmark. What made the difference? And what lessons can be learned from them?

Best practices for the most effective ad creative

Kantar uses its sophisticated AI-fueled model to analyze ads based on 15 measures of predictive creative quality. For this analysis, three measures were prioritized:

- **Impact:** Is the ad likely to break through and create a memory for the brand?
- **Brand power:** Is it likely to contribute to long-term brand equity?
- **Short-term sales lift:** Is it likely to drive sales in the short term?

Kantar used its Link AI model and scoring system to analyze the Super Bowl ads and

“To tell a story that breaks through and creates a brand memory that leads viewers to purchase is difficult. But our research shows the effort is worth it.”

Kerry Benson, VP, content analytics, Kantar

surprisingly found that two-thirds—a significant majority—scored only average.

Only 12%, or just eight out of 70 ads, were scored as “strong” ads—and are predicted to have the maximum positive effect on brand equity and ROI. The 2022 Super Bowl ads that are predicted to produce double-digit wins have three things in common, consistent with Kantar’s best practices for the most effective creative:

1. **The ad creative is effectively—and uniquely—linked with the brand.** As Benson put it: “If you take the brand out of the ad’s storyline, does it still make sense? If so, then the brand isn’t linked well enough.” Many of the Super Bowl ads are highly engaging and entertaining, but the brand is peripheral. “If viewers don’t remember what brand the ad was for—that’s a problem,” said Troncoso.
2. **The creative establishes an emotional connection with the audience**, one that will make the viewer recall the ad and consider the brand. That connection does not need to be heavy or serious—it can be funny as well, as long as it’s meaningful. Some strategies are more successful than others; nostalgia, for instance, can be a tricky proposition if newer generations don’t relate to the references to former cultural icons.
3. **The creative needs to generate conversation and engagement during and after the broadcast.** Although that’s especially true for the Super Bowl



Besides featuring high-wattage star power, (clockwise from l.) Nissan's "Thrill Driver," Amazon Alexa's "Mind Reader" and Cheetos' "Push It" all displayed Kantar's best practices for ad creativity to generate maximum brand equity and ROI.

advertisers, it applies to any highly effective ad. "You want your ad to be talked about when it airs," said Troncoso.

Benson points to Nissan Motor Corp.'s "Thrill Driver" as an ad that worked on all three counts. Eugene Levy's wild, theatrical ride in the flashy 2023 Nissan Z made the car central to the story, with a strong emotional connection and postgame engagement.

Similarly, Amazon's "Mind Reader" starred not only power couple Scarlett Johansson and Colin Jost, but the Amazon Alexa—with a clever twist connecting to memorable moments. (Who hasn't wondered if Alexa was listening in to private conversations?)

These and other 2022 Super Bowl ads relied on popular, well-used creative techniques. Some worked, and some didn't.

Among the 2022 ads, 70% used celebrities, with an even higher level of A-list talent represented than in past years. But Kantar's analysis shows that, again, celebrities only work if their presence fits in with those three points listed above. Celebrities can create a highly entertaining ad, but only produce results if they are integral to the brand story. Benson says that even though she was not on screen, Megan Thee Stallion's starring role in Cheetos' animated "Push It" had a relevance

that helped the ad score a strong success for Frito-Lay.

To make that emotional connection with viewers, most of this year's Super Bowl ads relied on humor. "Humor was dialed up this year. The ads were laugh out loud funny, which was a relief after the environment of the past two years," Benson said. But again, she added, the humor has to connect with the brand. Kantar's analysis shows some ads connected more strongly than others, including the Amazon ad and Hellman's mayonnaise's "Mayo Tackles Food Waste." Other advertisers relied on nostalgia for that emotional connection, with many misses or merely average-scoring creative.

Key takeaways for all media buys

Why does all this matter? If an ad is able to move brand equity even by a fraction of a percentage point, that can translate into millions of dollars in expected sales. And Kantar research shows that improving a Super Bowl ad's creative quality from average to best will lead to a threefold increase in ROI.

The Super Bowl is, of course, a unique ad showcase. Long after the game has ended and the memory of which ads generated the best or worst reactions has faded, the key lessons learned are applicable to marketers in more everyday media buys:

Do celebs provide a big enough bang for the bucks?

In a word: yes. At least, sometimes. Celebrities work well in ads when they are integral to the brand story (versus distracting from the brand story). Beyond generating attention and buzz, celebrities drive ad effectiveness when they help the brand connect with the viewer emotionally, culturally or personally.

Although 70% of the 2022 Super Bowl ads featured celebrities, Kantar's Link AI places these three at the top of the predicted ROI rankings. Why? Kerry Benson, Kantar's VP, content analytics, said these three celebrities do more than simply entertain. Their roles connect to the brand message, helping build long-term brand equity and drive short-term sales.

Booking.com, "Booking.yeah":
"Idris Elba drives high creative performance for Booking.com because he brings a straightforward message to life in an

engaging way by the sheer force of his charm, delivery and appeal. Without Idris Elba playing this part, the ad wouldn't be as effective."

Sam's Club, "Like a VIP":
"Kevin Hart works hard for Sam's Club because his exaggerated self-importance pushes off against the message that all of Sam's Club customers get the same VIP treatment in the store. Without Hart's personality, the ad wouldn't work."

Salesforce, "New Frontier":
"Salesforce uses Matthew McConaughey to remind us that its technology helps us stay connected—while not losing sight of the human side of business. McConaughey has the gravitas and reputation to be able to pull this message off in a way that a celeb or regular actor wouldn't be able to achieve, which drives the creative performance higher."



No matter what the budget for creative or media, the brand has to play a compelling, memorable role in an ad.

The creative needs to make an emotional connection.

An ad can't try to do too much in 15, 30 or even 60 seconds. "There are so many ads that try to say everything in 30 seconds," Benson said. "When brands try to cram five key messages into an ad, it loses impact."

It's not easy. "To tell a story that will break through, relate to the viewer and keep them engaged, and at the end, have that viewer walk away with a brand memory that leads them to purchase either in the short or long term—that is difficult," Benson said. "But our research shows that the effort is really worth it."

Taking the time to focus on creative makes a difference. For one CPG brand, for instance, Kantar found that stronger creative

quality meant that each GRP worked harder to deliver increased sales. For this marketer, testing to produce "excellent" copy rather than "average" copy led to as much as 42% increased efficiency—in terms of short-term sales produced by the ad.

Years of research show numbers like that, demonstrating that creative quality has a direct impact on short-term sales and long-term brand equity. Using new predictive AI solutions, like Link AI, can lead to easy analysis across multiple ads in a short period of time. From there, patterns and trends can be identified to help influence and improve future campaign strategies.

Until the industry at large adopts solutions like Link AI that measure creative quantifiably—and at scale—the creative quality of ads remains the most powerful, yet relatively untapped, ROI lever for marketers to pull.

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