Study: Audi, Toyota win Super Bowl of auto TV ads

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The Audi R8 and Toyota Corolla took home the party favors from the Super Bowl. Commercials for the two cars outperformed other automotive spots broadcast during the Feb. 3 Super Bowl telecast, the market research firm IAG concludes. By contrast, a commercial for the GMC Yukon Hybrid fared poorly among viewers and critics.

The 60-second spot for the R8 sports car spoofs the movie The Godfather. Horsepower, in the form of a competing “old luxury” car’s grille, replaces a horse’s head in a mobster’s bed. The Venables Bell and Partners agency of San Francisco created the commercial.

The 30-second Corolla commercial, from the Saatchi & Saatchi agency in Los Angeles, demonstrates the small car’s quiet interior. A cannon shot fails to rouse “ferocious” badgers snoozing on the Corolla’s seats.

The R8 and Corolla ads were the two auto spots most recalled by Super Bowl viewers, according to IAG Research, of New York. Among the best-liked auto commercials, the Corolla and R8 spots finished 1-2, said Sallie Hirsch-Johnson, IAG’s senior vice president of research. Toyota also had a game spot for the Sequoia SUV.

Uphill struggle

GMC’s 60-second Yukon spot, which uses animated line drawings to depict the challenge of a rock-pushing Sisyphus, evidently was too much of an uphill climb for viewers. The spot’s voiceover asks: “Why change? Why push? Why grow? Why dream? Never say it can’t be done.’ Barack Obama decided to buy national ad time during the Super Bowl? No, the spot is for the GMC Yukon Hybrid. The ad doesn’t make an overly environmental case for the hybrid, instead making buying one sound, bizarrely, like a brave act of personal growth. Also, can’t your Yukon just tow the damn rock up the mountain?”

Leo Burnett Worldwide, GMC’s new ad agency, created the Yukon spot. Hyundai made its first ad foray in the Super Bowl since 1989. Viewers were not impressed by two spots for the new Genesis sedan that were created by Hyundai’s new ad agency, Goodby, Silverstein and Partners, of San Francisco.

One of the commercials said: “We’re not sure what USA Today’s Ad Meter will say about this ad.” In fact, viewers polled by the newspaper placed the spots near the bottom of the pack.

Two Super Bowl commercials for the vehicle-shopping Web site Cars.com fared well. In the IAG results, a Cars.com spot featuring a head-shrinking witch doctor was nearly as well-recalled as the R8 spot and finished ahead of the Corolla commercial.

Record audience

Advertisers paid about $2.7 million for 30 seconds of air time during the Super Bowl. This year’s game, broadcast by Fox, attracted a record 97 million U.S. TV viewers, Nielsen Media Research says.

Overall, IAG’s Hirsch-Johnson said, this year’s Super Bowl auto advertising “was not as strong in terms of effectiveness” as in previous years or compared to commercials for other products.

“There are so many automotive ads on TV that it is harder for viewers to recall the specifics of each one,” Hirsch-Johnson told Automotive News. “It is one of the harder categories to break through.”

But the success of Super Bowl advertising cannot be measured merely in ad rankings, says Gordon Wangers, an auto marketing consultant in Las Vegas.

The publicity surrounding a commercial before and after the game and the amount of online viewing it generates also are important, he says. Adds Wangers: “If you look at buzz and replay, I would give the award to Audi.”

Blog blab

Critics’ reactions to auto TV commercials that aired during the Super Bowl

Audi R8

“With a nod to the horse’s head scene from The Godfather, I’m scared not to buy that car. Scare the customer? Works for me.”

— MSN.foxsports.com

GMC Yukon Hybrid

* “Why change? Why push? Why grow? Why dream? Never say it can’t be done.” Barack Obama decided to buy national ad time during the Super Bowl? No, the spot is for the GMC Yukon Hybrid. The ad doesn’t make an overtly environmental case for the hybrid, instead making buying one sound, bizarrely, like a brave act of personal growth. Also, can’t your Yukon just tow the damn rock up the mountain?”

— Time.com

Hyundai Genesis

* Introduces a luxury car, as spacious as a Mercedes S class but priced like a C class. Then reveals the brand. Is the twist supposed to be that a luxury car could cost so little or that a Hyundai could cost so much? And do they want me wondering that?

— Time.com

Toyota Sequoia

“A grown man in a tricycle race with kids — because he knows that and SUV ownership is how to get the most out of life. Oh, shut up.”

— Advertising Age