The NFL’s Super Bowl: The Pinnacle of Event Marketing

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When the National Football League (NFL) first sanctioned competition between its own champion and the top team from the rival American Football League, CBS and NBC (the two major television networks that broadcast the January 15, 1967, game) held the event in such low esteem that they didn’t even keep a copy of their live telecasts. Back then, the game tickets sold for $12, the average cost for a 30-second ad during the telecasts was $42,000, approximately 40 million viewers watched the game on television, and so few people attended the game in Los Angeles that NFL officials asked the spectators to sit in the middle of the stadium so the TV cameras that panned the action could make it seem like the stands were full. Halftime entertainment was provided by the University of Michigan and the University of Arizona marching bands. The game was played in the afternoon, so as not to conflict with such evening prime-time viewing heavyweights as The Ed Sullivan Show, which featured The Rolling Stones that night. Fast-forwarding to today, a lot has changed. Super Bowl XL was watched by over 140 million viewers in America and by nearly 1 billion worldwide in more than 225 countries and territories. Since its inception, the cost of airing TV ads has risen by over 5,000%, to a staggering $2.5 million for every 30 seconds of commercial airtime for Super Bowl XL. Detroit was the lucky host for the 2006 game, the event was played and aired in the evening, and the halftime entertainment was provided by, well, yes, the Rolling Stones.
Marketing Forces Driving Super Bowl Popularity

Over the past 40 years, the Super Bowl has evolved from a mere football contest to what it has become today: a made-for TV mini-selling season sandwiched conveniently between post-holiday sales and Valentine’s Day. Just as Halloween gradually evolved from a kids-in-costume night to its present month-long, mega build-up for kids and adults, so too our modern-day Super Bowl now typically dominates the American marketing landscape for much of the latter half of January through the first week of February. (5)

Not surprisingly, this cultural evolution has not happened by accident. A variety of market forces have been hard at work to build up this gridiron classic to where it is now a highly profitable venture for more than just a handful of players and coaches on the field. May the late Vince Lombardi (the winning Green Bay Packer coach of Super Bowls I and II) not roll over in his grave, the actual playing of the game is now a relatively minor aspect of the spectacle, when compared with the multi-week, pre-game hype, the weekend-long food and beverage consumption binge, and the pre- and post-game merchandising of the event. What follows is a brief review of each market driver and its impact on the Super Bowl’s growing popularity.

Figure 1. Market Drivers of Super Bowl’s Growing Popularity

NFL Marketing Savvy: Event Background

The NFL is well aware that organizing the world’s biggest televised special event each year requires meticulous planning, expert contract negotiations, great logistical support, extensive media coordination, significant corporate partnering, proactive risk management, and relentless merchandising. Clearly, the League is proficient at each of these activities.

The NFL’s Strategic Genius

The genius behind the NFL’s continuous string of Super Bowl successes revolves around its remarkable foresight, its innovative strategies, and its operational excellence. As a product line, a collection of brands, and a federation of tightly knit corporate entities, the NFL and its various sport franchises have continuously demonstrated great marketing foresight. Few consumer products are as well promoted as the NFL and its flagship franchises. To illustrate this point, think of the
legions of raving fans that the New England Patriots have been able to create for their teams over the past four decades. Multiply this by 32 teams, subtract a bit for a couple franchises in transition, and you have a formula for repeated success.

From a marketer's perspective, the beauty of the Super Bowl is that consumers are loyal to this event regardless of who's playing in it. As much as local fans love their local teams, Chicago fans, for instance, don't need to have the Bears in the game to want to watch the game. The same is true for Miami fans, Indianapolis fans, Seattle fans, etc. As an example of this, host TV network ABC and the NFL were both a bit anxious to see the TV ratings in 2000, when two small market teams (the St. Louis Rams and the Tennessee Titans) competed in Super Bowl XXXIV. To their collective relief, the game ended up being one of the most watched TV events of all time, with an estimated TV audience of nearly 134 million U.S. viewers!

Compared to other professional sports, the NFL is at the top of its class. The League was one of the early pioneers in revenue sharing, salary caps, equitable player drafts, balanced scheduling, widespread broadcast access, and continuous image enhancement. The Super Bowl is the League's crowning achievement. It has become the benchmark by which all other sporting contests and special events are measured.

**Media Buy-in for the Event**

A December 2005 Google search on the key words “Super Bowl” yielded over 22 million results, and Googling just the term “NFL” yielded over 87 million results. That's more than Google produced on “Disney” or on Anheuser-Busch, Pepsi, McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Frito Lay, and all other Super Bowl XXXIX food and beverage advertisers combined! Not bad for a sports league whose original founding members back in 1920 were comprised of the Canton Bulldogs, the Cleveland Tigers, the Dayton Triangles, the Akron Professionals, the Rochester (N.Y.) Jeffersons, the Rock Island Independents, the Muncie Flyers, the Decatur Staleys, the Chicago Cardinals, and the Hammond Pros!(6)

The NFL's annual Super Bowl attracts media like warm, beautiful beaches attract tourists. Given the voluminous annual newspaper and magazine stories on the topic, the ample coast-to-coast radio and TV coverage the spectacle receives, and the worldwide interactive web and blogger traffic generated, a U.S. consumer would have to be holed up in a cave or marooned on a deserted island to miss the media blitz that routinely blankets this mid-Winter event.

After experimenting a bit with the timing of the game, the League wisely determined that one week of advanced hype for the event doesn't give local, regional, national, and international media sufficient time to promote the game properly. One week doesn't cut it. Two weeks is just right to build the event up to a feverish pitch. Before the game, and the ads begin, the American and global publics will be fed a steady stream of Super Bowl tidbits, trivia, fun facts, PR releases, injury reports, weather conditions, advertising listings, commercial previews, recipe reminders, and the like.

To get a flavor for how the event is now chronicled and spotlighted, check out these user-friendly web guides to the game, the parties, and the commercials provided below.

- Superbowl.com (the NFL’s official Super Bowl event website)
- Ifilm, superbowl-ads, and put-file.com (recent Super Bowl commercials)
- ad-rag.com (archives most Super Bowl commercials from 1969–2005)
- globalgourmet, ehow, and party411.com (Super Bowl recipes and party hints)
- Espn.go, break, and USAToday.com (miscellaneous game and ad-related stuff)
TV Advertisers

Using the Super Bowl as a platform to debut new, expensive, and highly creative commercials has become a marketing tradition. To the typical viewer, Super Sunday has become as much about the ads as it is about players in shoulder pads chasing each other around the field. Super Bowl advertising receives significant attention each year, in part, because of the size of the TV audience the event attracts.

Advertisers use the game to introduce a company name to consumers or to trot out an old act and try to make it appear new. Whether it's Farrah Fawcett shaving Joe Namath in a 1973 Noxema commercial, Apple Computer dramatically launching the 1984 MacIntosh, Jerry Seinfeld helping out a 1990s Superman with his American Express card, or Heineken-toting Brad Pitt fending off new millennium paparazzi, Super Bowl viewers have come to anticipate great things from the commercials they see.

In many ways, the game itself has become a sidebar to the ads, which are clearly a driver of the Super Bowl's rising popularity. For some viewers, the "ad bowl" has become so important that they would rather miss watching part of the game than any of the ads aired during the Super Bowl. According to a February 2005 poll by Penn Schoen & Berland Associates, 58 percent of the respondents said they talked more about the ads the next day than they did about the football game.

A commercial in the Super Bowl today reaches over 40% of all U.S. households. An estimated 134 million people tuned in to watch Super Bowl XXXIX on February 6, 2005. There is no other media vehicle available that can predictably deliver this size of an American TV audience.

In 2005, FOX charged advertisers $2.4 million for a 30-second commercial. In 2006, the ABC unit of the Walt Disney Company is charging an average of $2.5 million for a 30-second ad during Super Bowl XL. In spite of the sky-rocketing costs of airing Super Bowl commercials, some companies continue to have a significant presence in this mega television event. As an example, according to Nielsen Monitor Plus, in the 2005 Super Bowl telecast, Anheuser-Busch led all advertisers with 300 seconds of commercial time, followed by PepsiCo, with 135 seconds, and Ford Motor Company, with 120 seconds. Multiply each second by $80,000 and you have a good estimate of each advertiser's media investment in this game. According to media guru David Verklin, the Super Bowl in many ways is about intangibles. Ads during the Super Bowl, like other big events on TV (the Oscars, the World Series, the Survivor finale, etc.), are purchased for their ability to reach a huge unduplicated swath of the American consuming public.

Corporate Sponsorships

In addition to investing in network ads during the Super Bowl, Corporate America is also increasingly sponsoring special events related to this mid-winter classic. For all major league sports, sponsorship has become an important source of revenue. Special event sponsorship is defined as “the provision of resources (e.g., money, people, equipment) by an organization directly to an event or activity in exchange for a direct association to the event or activity.” Commercial sponsorship is one of the fastest growing sectors of marketing communications activity, especially for marketing consumer products.
Companies usually assess the success of their sponsorships by measuring media coverage and exposure.\textsuperscript{(16)} In the case of the Super Bowl, the extensive media coverage and exposure that sponsors receive is value enough to invest in the event.

At the Super Bowl, companies choose to be involved in pre-game, half-time, and post-game sponsorships. Firms help sponsor the Super Bowl by setting up tents on the game site and sending special invitations to top-level corporate executives and customers to attend. For Super Bowl XXXIX, fifty companies subleased space from the NFL so they could hold activities and games and prominently splash their names. Once inside the sponsor tents, people line up to do such things as kick a football through Hershey’s goal posts, catch punts at one of several Coke locations, and play the latest football video games from Sega and Playstation. Corporate sponsorship spending for 2005 was over $10 billion. Of this investment, sports sponsorships take the biggest share.\textsuperscript{(13)} Clearly, the increasing variety and nature of sponsorships surrounding the Super Bowl is driving the event’s popularity. As traditional media have become more expensive and cluttered, sponsorships have become a more viable alternative for consumer product companies.

### Host City Tourism

Short-term tourist events can have a major economic impact on the local area or city that hosts the event.\textsuperscript{(17)} The benefits for the host city are derived through tourism spending, the positive publicity, media attention, and permanent structural improvements.\textsuperscript{(17)} Because of these inherent benefits, hosting cities heavily invest in promoting the game.

In recent years, between 80,000 and 90,000 people have traveled to the city where a Super Bowl was being held. They each spent more than an estimated $700 for hotel rooms, $150 for car rentals, $300 for food, and $200 more for miscellaneous gifts. At the Super Bowl game itself, the per capita expenditure on food and beverage is estimated at $50 or more per person. The NFL and the host city share this food and beverage revenue.\textsuperscript{(18)}

The NFL usually tries to schedule the Super Bowl in a city that just built a new stadium or in an attractive warm weather city. The NFL additionally ensures that the host cities have enough hotel rooms and amenities to accommodate up to 100,000 visitors.

Nine years ago, the total net impact of Super Bowl XXXI on the local community was estimated to be at least $200 million in economic activity. This financial local impact estimate has nearly doubled today. Super Bowl XL was played on February 5, 2006, in Detroit. In the past five years, Detroit has built a new football stadium for its Detroit Lions (Ford Field); a baseball stadium for its Detroit Tigers (Comerica Park); and Great Lakes Crossing, a 117-acre megamall.\textsuperscript{(19)}

Although the economic impact estimates vary from year to year, clearly, host city tourism is driving the Super Bowl’s growing popularity.\textsuperscript{(20)} According to University of Texas at Arlington professor Craig Depken, for a city that does not have a lot of tourism in February, such as Detroit, the event may have a much larger net impact than a city with significant tourism in February, such as Miami.

### Technology

Another major driver of the Super Bowl’s success is the NFL’s embracement of technological change. Back before the Super Bowl was created, football fans listened to the final games of the season on their transistor radios and watched what games were
available on their black and white living room TVs. As color TVs became increasingly popular in the 1960s, people relished the idea of viewing the games in color, in part because it made the opposing teams easier to identify.

Fast-forwarding to today, the NFL continues to embrace technological breakthroughs such as HDTV, cell phones, satellite radio, and interactive websites to promote its games. From gridiron videogames with NFL characters to interactive Super Bowl MVP fan voting, the NFL is championing these innovations.

According to NFL Manager of Corporate Communication, Dan Masonson, “New technology is the next frontier. We're continually looking for new and innovative ways to connect with our growing tech-savvy fan base, and new technologies are paving the way.”[21] To illustrate this, the NFL actively encouraged fan voting last year for the Super Bowl MVP on Superbowl.com and received over 468,000 votes. Underscoring this significance, interactive fan voting represents 20% of the NFL's Super Bowl MVP award calculation.

The NFL has become “NFL on the go” where fans can listen on live radio and actually watch the games via Sprint Wireless feeds on their cell phones.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the powerful forces that drive it, the Super Bowl has turned into an American social phenomenon of epic proportions. The NFL, the media, television networks, Corporate America, host city entrepreneurs, and technological forces have teamed up to drive the popularity of this event. Not only is the American public hooked on this event, there seems to be no end in sight.

Marketing professionals are typically in awe of how successful the NFL has been in linking up with TV networks, corporate advertisers, and local promoters to build the greatest show on earth. That term used to be reserved exclusively for Barnum & Bailey's renowned traveling circus act. No longer is this the case. Today, the NFL's Super Bowl spectacle dwarfs this old-time circus act many times over.

The Super Bowl phenomenon is of interest to both educators and students of marketing. Since strategies, tactics, and decisions are always context-specific, studying the marketing of the Super Bowl is at least as beneficial as studying any other marketed product. The event is clearly recognizable and of general interest to most students. Not surprisingly, a majority of American Marketing textbooks devote space to discussing the growing importance of Super Bowl advertising and merchandising.

For researchers of sports marketing, NFL's Super Bowl is of interest because, with rare exception, it is the most watched American television event each year. With titillating references to gladiator-like heroics and elaborate half-time concerts, the event now receives more hype and more pre-game promotions than any other American television program. The only other regularly scheduled American broadcast event that even comes close to the Super Bowl in public interest is Hollywood's annual Academy Awards presentation. In comparing two spectacles, both offer their respective audiences suspense, drama, competition, comic relief, elaborate costumes, and ultimately, victors and wild party-like celebrations. These attractions drive people to the event and keep them coming back year after year to watch the extravagant telecasts.

The Super Bowl is a recurring phenomenon that is likely to continue to grow in popularity. The drivers of the event's popularity will continue to make the Super Bowl even bigger in the coming years.
ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

1. What is your assessment of why the Super Bowl is as big an event as it is?
2. What are the drivers of this game’s popularity? What does each driver do to help continually build event momentum?
3. How do you envision the Super Bowl five to ten years from now?
4. Do you think the growth in ad rates for the game will continue? Where will it stop?
5. The Super Bowl is traditionally a big consumer day. Do you think that it is a good idea for business-to-business marketers to be affiliated with the game?
6. Do you think that the companies that use the Super Bowl as a promotional vehicle get a good return on their investment? Explain.

REFERENCES

3. B. Horwitz & B. Williams (Executive producers) (2001), Super Bowl’s Greatest Commercials, Television broadcast January 27, CBS.