

Viva the Vita

February 5, 2009

“Enhanced” Media Consumption

By James A. Bacon

First came the Super Bowl, then the Super Bowl ads, and then the hype over the Super Bowl ads that exceeded the hype over the football game. Then followed video streaming on the Internet, which inspired more replays of the ads than of the game highlights.

In the past two or three years, Americans have taken yet another step toward the transformation of the championship football game from an athletic contest into a media phenomenon. Millions of us now view “Super Bowl” ads that don’t even run on the Super Bowl.

A case in point this year was GoDaddy.com’s ad featuring Danica Patrick, the female Indy race car driver, in a spoof of a Congressional hearing into a major league “enhancement” controversy. Under questioning, a series of voluptuous young women vehemently deny being “enhanced.” Then the camera shifts to the comely but -- ah, shall we say -- slender Ms. Patrick, who announces, “Yes, I’ve enhanced.” The crowd gasps. “It’s true,” she continues, “I have enhanced my image with a domain and web site from GoDaddy.com.” The end of the ad invites viewers to visit the GoDaddy.com web site where they can view a “hot” Internet-only version.

The hot Internet ad generated more than 1.6 million views just on the *Spike TV* web site. As for the GoDaddy.com web site where viewers were directed, let’s just say it’s a good thing that GoDaddy is an Internet Service Provider or its servers might have crashed.

Boomers have a reputation of being less technologically savvy than their Millennial (Gen Y) children to whom such tasks as setting up Facebook pages, texting messages on their cell phones and Twittering are second nature. But that impression isn’t entirely fair. Let us not forget, Boomers did invent the personal computer. (Anyone remember Bill Gates and Steve Jobs?)

As for the rest of the Boomers, they are early adopters of technologies that enhance their television-viewing experience, noted a recent study sponsored by the TV Land cable channel. Boomers have eagerly embraced digital-video recorders like Tivo that free them from the “tyranny of network programming schedules.” They’ve warmed to video-on-demand, and they appear eager to switch to HDTV. Furthermore, Boomers have the numbers and spending power to drive the commercialization of new consumer electronics technology in a way that the younger generations do not. Apple has sold more than 100 million iPods. There aren’t 100 million teenagers. Boomers are pod people, too.

Our research data, culled from the BIGresearch Consumer Intentions and Actions survey, shows that Boomers are almost as likely to use the Internet as younger generations are. They just use it for different things. Boomers view the Internet as a means of information retrieval: They are *more* likely than younger generations to use the Internet to check the weather, inspect stock prices or look up sports

scores. They are equally likely to hop online to go shopping. By contrast, younger generations are more likely to regard the Web as a vehicle for social interaction, for such purposes as instant messaging, locating old friends and sharing photographs.

Where the differences between generations emerge most starkly is in advertising. For the most part, according to BIGresearch data, Boomers are more receptive than Millennials to “old media” advertising like the Super Bowl ads that play on the broadcast networks, as well as print ads in magazines and newspapers. Millennials are far more likely than Boomers to be influenced by ads in blogs, online video games and cell phone text messages.

At the Boomer Project, we do dearly love our iPhones and Blackberries, but we confess to being baffled why Millennials feel compelled to text one another dozens of times a day -- sometimes to friends in the same room – much less to read the ads that accompany the messages. But we’re not entirely immune to the siren call of digital media.

A 60-something buddy of ours emailed his friends links to several bawdy Anheuser-Busch ads that had been “censored” by the Super Bowl. In the 30-second spots, a young man watching television with his dog innocently found himself in awkward poses of a sexually suggestive nature just as his girlfriend happened to walk past the door. Definitely not suitable for prime-time viewing. But very funny – just the kind of thing Boomer dads would forward to their chums by the millions. (Compared to \$3 million for a Super Bowl spot, by the way, those YouTube videos are a bargain for the beer maker.)

We Boomers may have been weaned on TV, but we’re growing beyond our analog roots. We dig e-mail, we read blogs and we poke around YouTube. If someone would just explain to us what Twitter does, and why we should care, we could out-hustle our children technologically any day of the week.

James A. Bacon is vice president-publishing of the Boomer Project, a marketing research firm that specializes in marketing to Baby Boomers. He can be reached at (804) 873-1543, or jim@boomerproject.com.