

The Super Bowl – no, not the game

The one event that attracts tremendous attention this time of year is the Super Bowl. Millions of folks plan their lives around Super Bowl Sunday, including me.

Curiously, among these millions are those who look forward not to the Super Bowl itself, but to the ads.

Year after year, the curious wait for the stoppages during the game – the time-outs, the official replays and halftime – to see what's new in the world of advertising. Many engage in conversation and debate about the ads' content, focusing largely on the tools, technologies and visual effects with which the ads are created and delivered – the style more than the substance, the sizzle more than the steak, the eye-candy more than the depth of the message.

Me, I'm a bit different. I, too, look forward to the ads; however, not for the cool, but for the tone and tenor in which the ads are wrapped.

What I find, and found again in 2009, is the preponderance of abuse – physical, emotional, and verbal – running through these ads, especially the ads intended to be "humorous." In 2009, we see a fellow hit by a bus, an electrocution, someone hit in the head with a golf club, a terrible ski accident and a middle manager who is thrown out a fourth-story window, crashing to the ground below – and all this in the game's first quarter! Wonder what's in store in 2010.

There's a penalty in most sports called "unsportsmanlike conduct." Basically, unsportsmanlike conduct is called when a player, coach or spectator refuses to play by the rules or acts in an unbecoming way that is not ethical, fair, and honorable and includes behavior that is deemed deceitful, disrespectful or vulgar. Examples include throwing punches, deliberate physical contact with officials, verbal abuse and taunting. My take is "unsportsmanlike conduct" threads through many of these ads. But, where's the penalty flag!

Do these ads reflect the widespread physical, emotional and verbal abuse that exists in our culture or does our culture reflect the abuse exhibited in these ads?

What I observe in these ads is a consistent degree of deceit, violence, conflict, and abuse that is either directly generated towards another, or that is tolerated, enjoyed, and entertaining to those, in the ad, who witness it.

What I take away from these ads is the idea that out-and-out disrespect of others is an appropriate and acceptable behavior in our culture, and that abuse, deceit, cheating and demeaning and sarcastic behavior in any form is funny and should be taken as "business as usual" or "no big deal."

My sense is there's a "macho" (well, it *is* the Super Bowl!) element here that says all is fair in love and war. I'm curious about the writers and creative types who fashion these ads. I'm curious about their notions of male-ness, or womanhood, or honesty, or relationships, for example, and their need to incorporate abuse and violence to sell their message. I'm curious how they arrive at the rationale that says violence, abuse and deceit sells. How did it come to be that gratuitous violence, abuse and deceit is seen as appropriate and acceptable? Have we become so numbed and desensitized to such a way of life that few shake their heads and ask: How did we come to this? How did we become so indifferent to violence, abuse and deceit? And, why do we choose to view violence, abuse and deceit as entertaining and humorous? It wasn't always that way.

I'm looking forward to 2010 to see if anything's changed in the tone and tenor of the ads. I'm not holding my breath, however.

Oh, by the way, did you know that Super Bowl Sunday is one of the few times during the year that hospital emergency rooms are inundated with abused females? Does life imitate art or does art imitate life?

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Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D, C.P.C. is the founder of True North Partnering an Atlanta-based company that supports conscious living through coaching and facilitating. With a practice based on the dynamic intersection of mind, body, emotion and spirit, Peter's approach focuses on personal, business, relational and spiritual coaching. He is a professional speaker and published author. For more information, www.truenorthpartnering.com, or [pvajda\(at\)truenorthpartnering.com](mailto:pvajda@truenorthpartnering.com), or phone 770.804.9125. You can also follow Peter on Twitter: @petergvajda