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Using Silverblatt's Keys to Examine Budweiser Tribute Ad

The landscape of the country after the September 11th New York City terrorist attacks was unique, from the public mindset to the looming national security issues, and this had a great effect on both business and consumerism in the United States. Advertisers faced a challenge, in how to continue to market their products without seeming insensitive or overly consumerist. No other stage for television commercials is larger than the Super Bowl, and the 2002 event, occurring just five months after the attacks, created the opportunity for advertisers to rise to the occasion or fall by the wayside. Anheuser-Busch, a mainstay amongst Super Bowl advertisers, masterfully created an advertisement that not only reinforced their brand but paid homage to the somber mood of the country. Using Silverblatt's keys to analyzing media messages, this author will examine how Anheuser-Busch's tribute ad entitled "[Respect](#)" addressed the new political and emotional landscape while still maintaining their successful branding strategy.

In order to establish the background information and provide additional detail, the first key to explore is Process. Most obviously, the advertisement is being communicated by the brand of Budweiser. According to adland.tv, an online commercial database, Hill, Holliday, based in Boston, was the advertising agency responsible for the ad, with the Executive Creative Director being Tim Foley. Hill,

Holliday is one agency in the portfolio of the Interpublic Group of Companies, one of the big four global advertising holding companies. According to the Full Contact website, Foley left Hill, Holliday in 2006 to begin his own firm, Full Contact, where he remains partner and creative director. Foley's career has a large focus in the food and beverage industry, however his portfolio does not reflect any other advertisements quite like this ad Budweiser ran in the 2002 Super Bowl.

Within the Process key, one must also explore the functions of the media communication. In this case, the advertisement functions more as an expression than anything else. According to Silverblatt, the function of expression informs the speaker of their frame of mind ... how they are feeling or their attitudes toward people and issues (32). While there are other latent functions at work, the primary message behind this one-minute spot was to honor and acknowledge the events that had transpired and captivated the country. Bob Lachky, the vice president of brand management, is quoted in McCarthy's USA Today article (2002) as saying "It's a message from the heart of the company. We hope people see it as we intended. That we're Americans. That we know what the cost of freedom is."

Because the ad uses the traditional Clydesdales, a symbol long associated with Budweiser beer, as well as the Budweiser logo as a signature to the message, the latent functions of persuasion, performance and profit also exist. Sending a positive message of honor and tribute to the wide-ranging Super Bowl audience at a very sensitive time was sure to pull on the heartstrings of the audience. Budweiser's ads over the years are aimed at the "working-class man," as a competing adman is quoted in Hillary Chura's 1999 Advertising Age article. This executive, familiar with

the brand, goes on to summarize Budweiser's advertising strategy, "...all classic American values. Bud has tapped into that better than anybody" (Chura, 32). It is clear that Budweiser was able to leverage their longstanding goals of targeting American values through this tribute advertisement. No media communication regarding this sensitive type of issue goes without some initial criticism, however nearly ten years later it is still recognized as one of the best Super Bowl commercials of the young century (Cite). As the positive feelings outlived the negative, suffice to say the media communicators were successful in both the outright and latent functions.

More details of the meaning of the piece can be explored through Silverblatt's Context key. This advertisement was first presented in February 2002 during the Super Bowl, arguably the largest stage for television advertisements. Occurring five short months after the most significant terrorist attack on U.S. soil, advertisers found themselves in an unprecedented situation. Perhaps most notable, this advertisement was aired once, during the big game, and only once (Adland). The video has since been viewed up to one million times through online video sites such as You Tube, however it was never run on television again. Considering the humorous advertising campaigns put forth by Budweiser in the past, from the strategically croaking frogs to the "whassup" guys, the contrast of a somber, respectful tribute ad was a change of pace, and could be regarded as a risk. Prior to the game, the anticipation of the ads was thick, as it is every year, however in this case, there was apprehension regarding how advertisers would handle the hyper-patriotism that was sure to resonate with the country. In most cases, as Stuart Elliot

summed up in the New York Times, the advertisers rose to the occasion and the advertisements were received as tasteful and appropriate, as was the case with the Budweiser ad.

Further detailed examination of the historical context shows this ad provides an extremely unique commentary of the events of the time. The message of the ad is almost solely communicated through historical references. Primarily, the Budweiser Clydesdale team, a key brand image of the long-standing American brand for over seventy-five years, is shown on a journey through the snowy Midwest to New York City. Particularly jarring at that time given the newness of the attacks, the majestic horses face the New York skyline, without the Twin Towers, an obvious hole to the still grieving American audience. In combining these two strong historical symbols, one of a strong American-made brand, and another of a national tragedy in which the public banded together, the advertisement created a strong message of patriotism and respect, all without saying a word. This feeling of pride and recovery then only reinforced the longstanding American history of the Budweiser brand, while still paying sincere tribute to the events at hand. In the singular airing of the ad, the brand specifically stated that a tribute was meant to be paid, not a profit to be made. This fact received some criticism at the time, however as previously stated, in most cases after nearly a decade, the ad is revered more than criticized.

Part of the success of this particular message had to do with the Framework employed in its creation. The title of the presentation is "Respect", simply put; a concise summary of the overall message of the piece. While many advertisements

have titles and are referred to as such within the advertising industry, this ad's title was more impactful as many people watched the ad online after its initial airing. The plot of the one-minute spot tells the story of the Budweiser Clydesdales harnessing up at daybreak to begin their journey across the seemingly Midwestern snowy landscape, pulling the traditional Budweiser cart. The view breaks away from the mesmerizing and very recognizable Clydesdale hooves to a shop owner, who looks in awe at the hitch going through town. The hitch makes its way across a bridge to look on to the New York City skyline. After showing the Statue of Liberty in the distance, and providing a close up view of the horse's eyes, the Clydesdales kneel in respect for the city of New York in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks. This simple plot is an excellent example of the "show, don't tell" adage to which Silverblatt refers (143).

All of these small details within the plot line produce a strong affective response to the ad. The snowy Midwestern scene touches the heart of America, many of whom many have experienced something similar that very morning. The media communicators effectively use dramatic devices to illicit an emotional response from the viewers. For example, the scene showing the shop owner in awe of the hitch is a feeling that mirrors the audience's feeling of the majestic animals. This affective response is what makes the ad effective, memorable and well respected.

After the attacks on September 11th, many advertisers utilized what Betsy Gelb called "Market Patriotism," and known more commonly as flag-waving (67). The art of using patriotic messages within advertising is certainly not new, nor did it

begin after the tragic terrorist attacks. However, the heightened sensibilities of the nation led advertisers to capitalize on these patriotic messages in the months following the attacks. Jay Hyunjae Yu's 2009 article outlines a few brands that used this patriotism to their own detriment, including GM, whose appeals were seen as taking advantage of the deaths of many. In the case of the Budweiser ad "Respect," a careful and seemingly sincere message was crafted and displayed on a national stage. Examining Silverblatt's keys of Process, Context and Framework shows how elements were used by Budweiser and their advertising agency Hill, Holliday to structure a message that appealed to many during a sensitive time, and yet maintain a positive image of their long-standing American brand.

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