

Super Bowl ads play to women

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Every year this time it's the same story: Advertising execs face as much pressure as the boys on the gridiron to outdo one another with the best and most talked-about Super Bowl commercial.

And this year's narrative is clear: getting the attention of the female viewer.

The men (and women) on Madison Avenue are homing in on the female audience on what is their biggest stage of the year. Those watching the San Francisco 49ers play the Baltimore Ravens in the Super Bowl on Sunday will likely notice the shift. Last year's ads included a Teleflora commercial for Valentine's Day, and Audi's big spot was a fun play on the success of the "Twilight" series (and all things vampire). There was a turning of the tide, so to speak, and this year we'll see more of the same.

"It's about time," said Tim Malefyt, an advertising professor at Fordham Business School. "The effect of the Super Bowl is much greater than just Super Bowl Sunday. These ads live on social media and websites, and marketers want to get the most from that. Women are far more social than men are. It's not just that they're tweeting and emailing more, but ... women tend to create connections that go on and are much more likely to suggest things that get other women involved.

"They create a sense that is much more community oriented. Women are better communicators and networkers than men. And marketers are really recognizing women."

Andrew Rohm, a marketing professor at Loyola Marymount University, said catering advertisements to women makes sense. Nielsen statistics show that female viewership of the Super Bowl has increased over the past 10 years. The Super Bowl audience in 2002 was 64 percent men. Last year, the gender gap had narrowed by 10 percentage points (54-46 men), according to Sports Business Daily.

This Sunday, expect to see more ads for gender-neutral products. There also promise to be products targeted toward the head of the household, which in many cases is a woman.

Plus, there's this little nugget: "The Super Bowl generates more women viewers than the Oscars, Grammys and the Emmys combined," Rohm said. "If you want to reach women, this is the event to do so."

A record 51 million women watched the Super Bowl last year. And women make 85 percent of all household purchases, said Katherine Wintch, an ad executive and founder of the Mom Complex, a unit devoted to marketing to mothers for the Martin Agency in Richmond, Va.

"In general, marketers are becoming more and more aware of the spending power and influence of women and moms," Wintch said. "We saw that in the Super Bowl last year. When you look at the Matthew Broderick spot for the Honda CR-V -- that's typically a product purchased by a soccer mom. And women and mothers loved it. I applaud them for that, because the tendency is to show a traditional perfect soccer mom driving that car. I love that they raised the bar of creativity and said, 'How do we do something more provocative, not what is normally done all year long?'"

Matt Paget, a managing partner at Extension PR, an agency that counsels brands and sports league offices, said social media is a cornerstone. In the past few years, most brands have released their commercials on the Internet as early as a week before the big game -- largely because it's free and they get more eyeballs on their product than they would even during the Super Bowl broadcast. And women, Paget said, share those ads on social media.

"Where it gets amazing is that women are more interested in the commercials than men are," he said. "They're a more captive audience ... and women are more active on social media. Not only is the woman the purchaser in the household, not only is she half the viewing audience, but there are more women on Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest. They're more active and they're more likely to mention the brand. As a result, you're seeing the overall approach to commercials change; you're seeing less-sexualized commercials. Even when you use someone like The Rock, you're seeing him as a dad."

Wintch said she worries about the commercials going too female kitsch.

"My fear is that I don't want the pendulum to shift too far," she said. "What potentially could happen is that people say women and moms are more influential and important, so let's make a bunch of mom ads and dumb the creativity down. But I don't want them to get boring and be cardigans and capri pants, holding the product and looking at the camera. We need to maintain a high bar of creativity."

Audi, for one, said there is no danger of that happening. Loren Angelo, general manager of brand marketing for the luxury carmaker, said they'll continue making commercials that appeal to both sexes.

"We consistently look to target both genders," Angelo said. "It's almost an equal male and female audience now, and our targets are focused on individuals who have that more progressive mindset. So when we look at the creative development process, it has appeal for everyone."

Brenda Fiala, a senior vice president of strategy at Blast Radius, a digital ad agency, said early buzz has been around Kate Upton's [Mercedes-Benz commercial](#). The ad hit the Internet last week and features the supermodel in barely-there clothing, directing a group of guys washing a car. Critics said it was a step back for women. On the other hand, it created chatter for the automaker.

Fiala said she'd rather cheer for commercials like those the NFL showed this season, which markets to female football fans.

"Women's products don't always have to be girly," she said. "They don't always have to be pink and they don't always have to be lipstick. One out of every two households is headed by a woman. Ads that are targeted toward the strength of women and realizing that a mom does many things -- household repairs, car repairs to cooking dinner to being herself and having her own friends -- is a great way to connect with women."