

## Medals for ads during NBC's Winter Olympics coverage

*Stuart Elliott*

THE seemingly continuous commercials during the coverage of the Winter Games on the networks of NBC Universal gave a new meaning to the term "snow job."

It was as if every spot showed snow, or ice, or both, in which skiers, skaters and snowboarders cavorted. That made it difficult for ad-weary, ad-bleary viewers to distinguish the commercials from the actual coverage of the Vancouver Olympics.

Perhaps that was the sponsors' fiendish intent: to perpetrate the ultimate blurring of the line between advertising and content.

Or maybe they were being meanies, reminding viewers of the awful weather awaiting so many of them if they dared to turn off their television sets and venture outside.

Wouldn't it be better to attract viewers' attention by using ads with summer settings during the Winter Games? That was a reason a spot for Chicken McNuggets stood out; it showed a young man in tropical garb entering a McDonald's restaurant surrounded by palm trees.

Alas, McDonald's was so enamored of the commercial that it ran incessantly during the coverage from Feb. 12 through Sunday. This reporter saw the spot 14 times in 17 days and nights of watching NBC and MSNBC, accounting by itself for 1 percent of the 1,405 commercials he watched.

As bruising as the McNuggets repetition was, it was not the worst example. A commercial promoting tourism in British Columbia was seen 17 times. A spot for the Nissan Leaf turned up 16 times, as did a commercial for AT&T and Samsung featuring the skater Rachael Flatt.

The most prolific advertiser by this reporter's count was General Electric; six G.E. commercials ran a total of 51 times. Toss in the spots for movies from its NBC Universal unit like "Green Zone" and "Despicable Me" — not to mention the endless promotions for NBC series like "The Marriage Ref" and "Parenthood" — and General Electric had a larger presence in Vancouver than the Sidney Crosby Fan Club.

Not far behind G.E. was Visa, with 46 commercials, followed by the Chevrolet division of General Motors, with 40.

It was not so much the amount of commercials in each break — sometimes, as many as seven — that wore viewers down as it was the number of breaks each hour during most of the NBC coverage.

For instance, there were eight breaks from 8 to 9 p.m. (Eastern time) on Feb. 12; nine breaks from 9 to 10 p.m. on Feb. 15; and seven breaks from noon to 1 p.m. on Feb. 21. Even as the Games ended, NBC could not stop cramming in commercials. In the final 50 minutes between 11:35 p.m. Sunday and 12:25 a.m. Monday, there were seven breaks.

Is it any wonder viewers were so appreciative when commercials were rationed or eliminated, as during ice dancing or the Canada-United States hockey game? "Like manna from heaven and extraordinarily much appreciated in this household," a grateful viewer, Robert Blinick, wrote in an e-mail message on Monday.

Now it is time to present, in alphabetical order, imaginary medals in a post-Olympics ad review. Dreadful ads received the dreaded lead medal. Spots that fell short or rang falsely received tin medals. The few commercials worth watching qualified for gold.

Here are how some advertisers and agencies fared:

**AT&T/SAMSUNG** A commercial with a familiar American male skater, which promoted watching the Games on the Samsung Mythic using AT&T Mobile TV, ran so often that every time it came on viewers cried, "Oh, no!" At least, it sounded that way. Tin. Agency: BBDO New York, part of the BBDO Worldwide unit of the Omnicom Group.

**AUDI OF AMERICA** A commercial urging drivers of rival makes like BMW to "break the spell" and try an Audi cleverly spoofed status-seeking. Gold. But a spot about how a "winner" drives an Audi and a "loser" sticks with other marques was mean-spirited. Lead. Agency: Venables Bell & Partners.

**GENERAL ELECTRIC** One stand-out spot was "Let's Take a Look," fancifully demonstrating how doctors through the ages had no idea what ailed their patients — until you-know-who brought "healthmagination" to medicine. Gold. A commercial in which a chorus of patients saying "Ahhhhh" was set to "Ode to Joy" ran too often, wearing out its welcome. Tin. Agency: BBDO New York.

**NBC Commercials** welcomed the return of Mr. Boomerang, Jay Leno, to "The Tonight Show" with a churlish use of the Beatles lyric "Get back to where you once belonged." Tin. A dim-witted promotion for the NBC Tuesday prime-time lineup sought to bundle the bathetic reality series "The Biggest Loser" with a new scripted show, "Parenthood," as "our night for family." Lead. Agency: Internal.

**NISSAN MOTOR** The electric Nissan Leaf sure looked like the innovative kind of car drivers would want to buy right now. Too bad the commercial never mentioned it is not due in showrooms until December. Tin. Agency: TBWA/Chiat/Day, part of the TBWA Worldwide unit of Omnicom.

**PROCTER & GAMBLE** The best commercial of the Games was an uplifting spot, part of a "Thanks, Mom" campaign for Procter & Gamble, demonstrating how mothers will do just about anything for their children. The commercial was as corny as Kansas in August, but appropriately so: It was set to a Rodgers and Hammerstein classic, "You'll Never Walk Alone." Gold. Agency: Wieden & Kennedy.

**SNICKERS** A hilarious sequel to a hit spot from the Super Bowl, which featured Betty White and Abe Vigoda, showed how hunger could turn dudes on a road trip into cranky divas — as personified by Aretha Franklin and Liza Minnelli. Gold. Agency: BBDO New York.

**SUBWAY** Several breezy commercials promised that "any, any, any" footlong sandwich costs \$5 at Subway. But the deal seemed less generous when an announcer narrowed it to "any regular footlong" and these words appeared on screen: "Excludes premium subs." Tin. Agency: MMB.

**TOYOTA MOTOR** Toyota offered the most clever car commercials, featuring un-hip parents so clueless about how clueless they were that they called their Sienna minivan a "swagger wagon." But does Toyota want to be associated these days with cluelessness? Tin. Agency: Saatchi & Saatchi, part of the Publicis Groupe.

**VISA** Visa (and Coca-Cola) were among the few advertisers to include athletes from outside the United States in their commercials. The best Visa spot offered a humorous salute to the 1988 Jamaican bobsled team; for once, the Visa announcer, Morgan Freeman, sounded like a human being rather than relying on his tired voice-of-God bit. Gold. Agency: TBWA/Chiat/Day.

**Fonte: New York Times, New York, Mar. 1<sup>st</sup> 2010, Media & Advertising, online.**