

Debate

Jarring Nationwide Advertisement

ISSUE: Was the Nationwide Insurance advertisement “The Boy Who Couldn’t Grow Up” an authentic attempt to save lives or a shameless attempt to promote the brand?

During the 2015 Super Bowl, Nationwide Insurance aired an advertisement with a depressing message. The message was jarring to audiences across the nation—as it was intended to be. The 47-second ad titled “The Boy Who Couldn’t Grow Up” featured a young boy who returned from the grave to lament that he will never learn how to ride a bike, get cooties, learn to fly, sail around the world with his best friend (his dog), or get married. Each is accompanied by a scene of the kid doing the activity, meant to resemble memories or fantasies. In the last scene, he stands in front of a house with an open second-story window and tells the audience that he will never grow up because he has been killed in a preventable childhood accident. The scene cuts to an overflowing bathtub, household chemicals scattered on the floor, and a giant big-screen television lying smashed on the carpet to represent the accidents of drowning, poisoning, or being crushed—some of the more common ways that children are killed accidentally from objects around the house. The commercial ends with a female voiceover: “At Nationwide, we believe in protecting what matters most—your kids. Together we can make safe happen.”

Nationwide has an advertising budget of \$350 million. A 30-second advertising slot during the Super Bowl is estimated to cost \$4.5 million, which emphasizes the importance that Nationwide has placed on this ad. The advertisement itself was created by Ogilvy & Mather Advertising and took two days of filming. Nationwide claims that the commercial was not created to sell a brand, but to create awareness about the number one killer of children. The intent was to save lives by alerting parents to the common contributors of fatal childhood injuries around the house.

The advertisement immediately elicited comments on Twitter and other social media. It did not take long for the kid to become a meme on social media, with critics poking fun at the advertisement. Comedian Patton Oswalt tweeted, “The second I see a kid in one of these commercials I immediately assume they’re going to die. Thanks, Nationwide!” Nationwide responded to the negative feedback by defending the advertisement’s attempt to start a conversation that would save children’s lives.

Not all the feedback was negative. Some viewed the advertisement positively as a way to remind parents of common dangers in the house that are easily overlooked. They feel like the commercial made people stop and think. Although a major criticism was levied against Nationwide for airing the commercial during the upbeat Super Bowl game, the timing serves to reiterate Nationwide’s point. Preventable childhood accidents are unanticipated and can easily happen at *any* time if the dangers are not addressed. The advertisement itself—which started off relatively light-hearted with its surprising and sad twist at the end—was intended to be jarring and to make people stop and listen. Research shows that these types of advertisements are more easily remembered because they stick in people’s memories. The company also pointed out how the advertisement prompted thousands of people to visit MakeSafeHappen.com, a website meant to educate consumers about ways they can safe-proof their houses to prevent these tragedies from occurring.

This material was developed by Jennifer Sawayda under the direction of O.C. Ferrell and Linda Ferrell. It is provided for the Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative at the University of New Mexico and is intended for classroom discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of administrative, ethical, or legal decisions by management. Users of this material are prohibited from claiming this material as their own, emailing it to others, or placing it on the Internet. Please call O.C. Ferrell at 505-277-3468 for more information. (2015)

On the other hand, others believed that the advertisement was an exploitative attempt to sell insurance by portraying Nationwide as a caring organization. Although the footage itself did not show anything that could be considered inappropriate, the message was dark and depressing to both parents and children. The commercial was mentioned about 250,000 times during the Super Bowl games, with nearly two-thirds of the reviews negative. Many of the reviews centered on the fact that football is a way for people to escape from the world, thereby making the advertisement unsuitable to be aired during the game. Others believe that despite Nationwide's stated intentions, the advertisement was simply a crass way to build their brand by making them seem caring and concerned. If the latter is true, then the kids featured in the advertisement were exploited just to sell insurance. According to critics, instead of making a difference, the ad was simply a sensationalistic way to bring attention to the company. Even critics who believe the company's intentions were good believe the well-intentioned message was lost because of the outrage it elicited.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Nationwide was creating awareness of a very important issue (childhood accidents). They had an important role in creating awareness to effectively prevent accidents.
 2. Nationwide was shamelessly trying to sell insurance in a sensationalistic manner.
-

Sources:

- Jay Busbee, "Worst Super Bowl ad ever? Nationwide's jarring dead-kid ad," *Yahoo! Sports*, February 1, 2015, http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/nfl-shutdown-corner/worst-super-bowl-ad-ever--nationwide-s-jarring-dead-kid-ad-012344158.html;_ylt=AwrTcdiqCdFUoysAIYEnnIIQ (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Matthew Diebel, "Dead Boy' Super Bowl ad too sad? Not so fast," *USA Today*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/02/02/travelers-and-parents-say-nationwide-dead-boy-ad-has-worthwhile-message/22750449/> (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Jessica Durando, "Why Nationwide aired upsetting Super Bowl ad," *USA Today*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2015/02/02/nationwide-insurance-super-bowl-commercial/22734895/> (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Sophie Jane Evans, "Backlash against Nationwide for 'dark' and 'depressing' Super Bowl ad about fatal childhood accident that stars dead little boy," *Daily Mail*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2935929/Outrage-Nationwide-Insurance-shows-dark-depressing-commercial-dead-little-boy-Super-Bowl.html> (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Bruce Horowitz, "Nationwide ad provokes; little else in Super Bowl does," *USA Today*, February 3, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2015/02/02/nationwide-super-bowl-advertising-marketing/22749245/> (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Phil Rosenthal, "Nationwide killed a boy in Super Bowl ad only because it loves kids," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/columnists/ct-rosenthal-nationwide-0203-biz-20150202-column.html> (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Amanda Michelle Steiner, "Nationwide: We Wanted to Start a Conversation, Not Sell Insurance," *People*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.people.com/article/nationwide-super-bowl-commercial-statement> (accessed February 3, 2015).
- Brian Stelter, "Nationwide ad meant to be jarring," *CNN Money*, February 2, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/02/02/media/inside-nationwide-ad-making/index.html?iid=Lead> (accessed February 3, 2015).