

Super Bowl advertisers spend \$5 million for 30 seconds: is there a better use for that cash?

Written by The Conversation USA

The Super Bowl is not just the biggest and most-watched event of the year in the United States, it's also one of the most important for advertisers, who shell out an estimated US\$5 million for every half-minute of air time.

Indeed, the ads are almost as well watched as the game itself, offering companies spending an [estimated \\$377 million altogether](#) a chance to get a laugh, burnish their brands and reach more than 100 million people with their corporate message.

But what if a brand took that large chunk of cash and bought something else with it? Is there a better way to spend it that could both be good marketing and do more for humanity?

Audi, which along with its parent company Volkswagen [is accused](#) of using software to allow its vehicles to emit excess emissions, for example, [bought 60 seconds](#) in the first quarter. Is a minute of product-oriented advertising really the best way it has to restore its image when the essence of its brand is in question?

This is not to say that the [40-some advertisers](#) that have already bought ad time need a new message to repair their brands. Rather, the question for me – with one foot in sport marketing research and the other in public policy – is whether they could do more for society and for their own reputations (typically the purpose of advertising) if they were to take a different tack.

In other words, be brave advertisers! Here's how.

Branded benefits

This isn't a novel idea, of course. There are plenty of examples of brand-sport relationships diverting their advertising value to society and benefiting in the process.

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Hublot, a Geneva-based luxury watchmaker, did just that after it signed on as a sponsor of UEFA's Euro 2008 soccer tournament. Rather than use its allocated stadium advertising space to trumpet its brand, it [promoted its values instead](#) by donating all of this valuable space to Unite Against Racism, a program that seeks to counter discrimination in European football.

This sweeping gesture had a [ripple effect](#) as other teams, sponsors and federations took on the social responsibility message. Moreover, it was a meaningful and positive gesture for the watchmaker as well.

More recently, BNY Mellon and Newton Investment Management announced that they [would donate](#) their title sponsorship of the Oxford versus Cambridge boat race to Cancer Research UK. As a result, the race to be held on the River Thames in late March will be known as "The Cancer Research UK Boat Races."

The societal benefits of these actions are clear, but importantly, brands that do good things also benefit.

Research in the U.S. by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) found in 2008 that being a good corporate citizen supports revenue growth, increases profits and offers cost savings.

Similarly, a research review by RBC Global Asset Management [concluded](#) investments in companies with high social responsibility rankings perform just as well as their peers and can even do better.

The Super Bowl itself has already seen some calls for action and delivery of cause-related messages.

At Super Bowl XLVIII, for example, U2, Product (RED) and Bank of America [collaborated](#) to benefit the Global Fund, which aims to eliminate AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Also in 2014, Chevrolet used its ad time to support cancer survivors and raise awareness for World Cancer Day.

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Consumers, however, seem to want more than just words (and ads). [Research](#) by public relations firm Cone Communications shows that 82 percent of those surveyed are more likely to purchase a product from a company that clearly demonstrates results from its CSR initiatives.

A thought experiment

What we need to do, then, is imagine profound social investments. My list may not be the same as others, these are issues I think deserve more attention, but that's the point: to think freshly about how we spend and invest.

In one thought experiment, I imagined that the \$5 million slated for a 30-second ad was instead invested in cookstoves. Yes, stoves for cooking. Small three-stone fires are used by [nearly half the world's population](#) to cook meals, according to InStove, a nonprofit dedicated to relieving suffering by developing renewable technologies.

It doesn't get a lot of attention, but the firewood harvested for cooking by this method is a major contributor to deforestation and its burning indoors results in 4.3 million premature deaths annually.

A clean-burning cookstove able to use wood and biomass costs only about \$1,000 and can serve the needs of an extended family or even a small village. Its high efficiency reduces fuel use by 75 percent to 90 percent and health-harming emissions by 90 percent. Easy math says that \$5 million could buy 500,000 cookstoves – enough to supply dozens of countries in Africa and Asia.

This is a trifecta win for the environment, human health and the reputation of a company.

Alternatively, Super Bowl advertisers might band together and – in partnership with a nonprofit – [buy a vast tract of old growth forest](#) along the coast in the Pacific Northwest. At an estimated \$2,000 per acre, 25 minutes of advertising time (at a cost of about \$250 million) could purchase 125,000 acres in Elliott State Forest.

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Oregon, which owns the land and allows some logging, is considering selling it. Helping a conservation group to buy it would preserve habitat for species that most of us have read about as children such as the Great Horned Owl, save less known endangered species such as the marbled murrelet that prefers to nest in old growth forest and seed stock for plants we have not even named.

Another idea close to my heart: \$5 million would go a long way in limiting the trade of elephant tusks. Poachers [reportedly slaughter](#) as many as 35,000 African elephants every year, with only 500,000 estimated to remain alive. One 30-second ad forgone [could double](#) the total grant contributions toward elephant conservation administered by the African Elephant Conservation Fund in 2014.

Better for brands and society

The purpose of this article is not to denigrate the Super Bowl, football, advertising, brands or anything else as American as apple pie.

This is about how wealth might be mobilized to do some of the things we know need doing and some of the things that may not have occurred to us.

It's also about understanding the relative cost of actions with long-term implications for society and environment and how corporations as "citizens" can communicate and validate their social responsibility record. Corporate social responsibility activities are related to economic performance of firms but claims must ring true.

Socially responsible behavior must be validating and observable in order to influence stakeholder actions and have the positive effect on revenues [research shows](#) can happen.

Brave corporate decisions, paired with clever communications, need not cost more for the firm than the millions they freely spend on Super Bowl advertising, but it does require that we think creatively.

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Any company needing inspiration or an idea of how to back up their CSR words with actions need look no further than the new [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) . For the next 15 years, these goals aim to transform our world. After reading the facts there, only a cold soul would be unable to find a CSR project that deserves a \$5 million infusion.

T Bettina Cornwell has consulted with Sport for Good, which has financial support from auto maker Daimler Benz.

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