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Super Bowl Ad Winner: Hyundai's Big Marketing Idea

Automaker's Assurance Program Spot Won't Win Any Polls, but It Might Actually Move Some Metal

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It won't top any of the many meaningless Super Bowl ad charts, but the best advertising in the big game was Hyundai's "Contract."

The spot itself is not a visual extravaganza like the Coke or Audi spots, nor was it made according to the trite USA Today Super Bowl ad formula -- two parts ha ha, one part whacky, throw in an animal if you have one at hand. The Goodby-made spot simply shows a few different Hyundai models, while a voice-over says:

"Whenever you buy a new car you have to sign a contract, but what about the company selling it to you -- where's their signature? Introducing Hyundai Assurance. Now finance or lease any new Hyundai, and if you lose your income in the next year, you can return it with no impact on your credit. Sound too good to be true? Come and see us, and we'll put it in writing for you. Visit Hyundaiusa.com for details."

That, right there, is an honest-to-goodness big marketing idea -- rare at any time, and in particularly short supply in the ad industry's supposed showcase. With [the Assurance program](#), Hyundai confronts the recession head-on and does something tangible to tackle its effects. Not -- like Coke and Pepsi -- by insisting they re-imagine our world as this happy, hopeful place, but by actually eliminating some of the fear around making a big purchase.

The idea was born in an internal meeting at Hyundai's offices in California. "This is a recession of fear," said Joel Ewanick, VP-marketing at Hyundai. "We realized that the elephant in the room was the fear of losing your job. I feel the same way. We all do. The idea of giving people the option to give the car back if they were struggling . . . seemed a great way to make customers comfortable and increase our market share in an economy like this."

Ewanick's team turned to WalkAway, a company founded in Canada that offered an off-the-shelf package to underwrite the effort. WalkAway USA has offered such plans directly to consumers and dealerships before, but never had a major marketer brand the scheme as its own, as Hyundai is doing.

Jeff Beaver, senior VP-marketing and product management for the company, said the scheme has proved popular with local dealers who've tested it.

"It differentiates them from other local dealers, but it also has the byproduct of creating loyalty. If someone does have to bring their car back . . . they really appreciate the dealer taking it. Some even end up buying a cheaper, secondhand car from the same dealer or, at least, they go back to that dealer later, when their finances have improved."

Assurance was communicated to dealers late last year and then rolled out to consumers in ads which began airing Jan. 3. The ads featured lines such as "We've got your back" and "We're in this together."

But is Assurance moving metal? At press time, January car-sales figures weren't out, although Ewanick expected to be flat year-on-year, which would be a reasonable achievement in a market where others are expected to see double-digit drops. But it's a little early to say. "Dealers have only just started doing their local direct marketing," said Ewanick. "But showroom traffic is definitely rising."

Two of the most frequent responses dealers heard were that people didn't trust it because it was too good to be true, and that they were worried it would hurt their credit scores -- those points are addressed in the Super Bowl spot. Buying in the Bowl shows Ewanick's confidence in Assurance, a program he promises Hyundai will run for at least a year. "Will it be here forever? I hope not. I hope it won't be needed. But we'll run it as long as it is."

"Contract" isn't going to knock Mean Joe Greene off the top of the Super Bowl commercials lists, but it'll surely sell some steel.

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