



Two Important Lessons from the Super Bowl

Lesson #1: when you need one yard for a touchdown that will probably seal a victory, and you have an unstoppable running back on your team, *hand the ball to Marshawn Lynch*. Lesson #2: when your organization has been drowning in bad publicity and you desperately need to change the narrative, *hand the ball to John F. Kennedy*. That's what Carnival Corporation (parent of Carnival Cruise Lines) did in their Super Bowl commercial, and their ad is a 60-second course in turning the tide on *any* issue. [Full Story](#) Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

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Carnival Corporation is the world largest cruise ship operator, but it's been sailing in particularly rough seas for the past three years. In 2012, the Costa Concordia, a cruise ship operated by a Carnival subsidiary, grounded off the Italian coast, killing 32 passengers. The following year, the Carnival Triumph lost power for five days in the Gulf of Mexico, and conditions on board became so unhealthy that the term "poop cruise" became an Internet meme.

Cable news networks had a feeding frenzy on both stories, and as Carnival's reputation sank lower and lower, the company had to come to terms with its image problem. In July 2013, Arnold Donald replaced Mickey Arison as CEO, and it was Donald who commissioned a new ad campaign to change the story. "Our overall goal is to successfully share that cruising is not what some people think it is," said Donald in a company release.

The Super Bowl commercial, which you can see [here](#), was produced by BBDO Atlanta and directed by Wally Pfister, a Hollywood cinematographer known for his visually stunning work in "The Dark Knight" and "Inception." As you might expect, it includes gorgeous shots of Carnival ships at sea along with images of passengers - young and old and in a rainbow of colors - clearly having the times of their lives.

What is unexpected, however, is the voiceover that accompanies these images unadorned by any music or other effects. In 1962, on the eve of the competition for America's Cup (the most prestigious prize in competitive sailing), President John F. Kennedy addressed the U.S. team in Newport, Rhode Island. A 60-second excerpt from that speech provides the entire sound track for the commercial.



President John F. Kennedy, speaking in Newport, R.I., 1962.

"I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because in addition to the fact that the sea changes, and the light changes, and ships change, it's because we all came from the sea. And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have, in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea - whether it is to sail or to watch it - we are going back from whence we came."

As an unseen audience applauds, the words "Come back to the sea" appear on screen, followed by the logos of all the cruise lines under Carnival's corporate umbrella.

As a piece of communication designed to change public opinion, the spot touches all the bases:

The right messenger: John F. Kennedy was an avid sailor and a legendary PT boat captain in World War II, so besides the gravitas he still brings to any subject as a former President, he is particularly credible talking about the sea. And if you're wondering how Carnival was able to obtain the rights to the speech - and essentially turn JFK into a company spokesperson - the answer is "research." With a little bit of homework, Bloomberg News reports, Carnival and its agency were able to determine that the speech was in the public domain.

The right message: The negative stories about Carnival were so pervasive and visceral that the company had no choice but to dive deep for a powerful counter narrative - and Kennedy's elegant remarks deliver.

"We are tied to the ocean," he reminds us, and when we return to it, we are coming back to our essential selves. The tagline "Come back to the sea" is a gentle ask that is more likely to evoke happy childhood memories of frolicking at the beach than any specific thoughts about cruise lines.

The right medium: Try watching the commercial without the sound. The images are still spectacular, but the overall effect is not as powerful. Now listen to the soundtrack without the visuals. Kennedy is still a wonderful orator, but without the Carnival footage, you're listening to a speech about our connection to the sea...period. While DVRs continue to chip away at television commercials as a means of communication, ads in live events such as the Super Bowl can still capture the public's imagination. And given that 114 million people watched Sunday's game - the largest TV audience ever - Carnival appears to have chosen the right medium to begin a long-term campaign of rebuilding its image.

Of course, it's still too soon to judge whether the "Come Back to the Sea" campaign will be a success, but the early indications are positive. Immediately after the game, Carnival's Facebook page ranked behind only two other Super Bowl advertisers (out of 40) in comments, likes and shares inspired by its advertisement.

And as for Pete Carroll and the Seattle Seahawks? They have plenty of time to stare at the majestic sea and wonder why they just didn't give Marshawn Lynch the damn ball.

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