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ADVERTISING

EVs scored during the Super Bowl. Will it help the climate?

Maxine Joselow, E&E News reporter • Published: Tuesday, February 4, 2020



Maisie Williams, a "Game of Thrones" star, was featured in an ad for Audi AG's e-tron Sportback. Audi USA/YouTube

The Kansas City Chiefs were not the only winner in the Super Bowl — electric vehicles also scored on the biggest advertising night of the year.

In between touchdowns, viewers witnessed a record three national ads for electric cars from major automakers. LeBron James touted the power and performance of General Motors Co.'s new electric Hummer, while Porsche AG's new electric Taycan sports car raced along the streets of Germany.

In perhaps the flashiest EV spot of the night, "Game of Thrones" star Maisie Williams belted the song "Let It Go" from the movie "Frozen" while cruising along in Audi AG's e-tron Sportback, which sped past gas guzzlers spewing pollution from their tailpipes.

The "it" in "Let It Go," by all accounts, appeared to be fossil fuels, the predominant way of powering passenger cars for the last century.

And in a fourth ad that only aired in certain locations, actor Idris Elba praised the attributes of Ford Motor Co.'s new electric Mustang Mach-E. (The ad aired in 10 regional markets including Detroit and Boston, according to a Ford spokeswoman.)

Yet environmentalists who watched the game were left with mixed feelings. While they commended the companies that paid for the spots, they said those ads shouldn't mask a larger trend: Major automakers have historically spent a tiny fraction of their advertising dollars on electric cars compared with large vehicles that burn gasoline.

"Yes, it is great that these three automakers advertised during the Super Bowl, where there's such a huge audience. But that's against the backdrop of how little auto companies are spending overall on advertising their EVs compared to their internal combustion engine vehicles," said Gina Coplion-Newfield, director of the Sierra Club's Clean Transportation for All campaign.

A recent [analysis](#) by Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management underscored this trend. It found that six major automakers spent far less money on ads for electric cars than gas-powered cars in the Northeast and California in 2018 ([Climatewire](#), Nov. 7, 2019).

In particular, the analysis found that GM spent \$0 on promoting the Bolt electric car in both markets, while it spent \$20 million in California and roughly \$8 million in the Northeast to promote the Silverado pickup truck.

Similarly, Ford spent \$400,000 in California and \$0 in the Northeast on advertising the Fusion Energi plug-in hybrid — less than 1% of what it spent on advertising the F-150 pickup truck in those markets.

"It's great to see these ads, but it represents so little of their advertising spending overall," said Coplon-Newfield. "It suggests that these ads may be more about their image and greenwashing than about trying to sell the product."

Beyond the question of advertising budgets, the Super Bowl spots may serve to obscure automakers' activities in other areas that harm the environment, said Dan Becker, executive director of the Safe Climate campaign.

For instance, Audi is a subsidiary of Volkswagen AG, which is under a court-ordered decree to sell 2 million electric cars in the wake of the Dieselgate scandal, in which the company cheated on emissions tests for 11 million diesel cars.

"The Audi ad didn't say, 'We're doing this because we were ordered to,'" Becker said.

In addition, the GM ad boasted that the company is committed to a future of "zero emissions." Yet GM is one of several automakers that has voiced support for President Trump's effort to gut California's clean cars program, one of the most effective tools at boosting zero-emission vehicle sales in the United States ([Climatewire](#), Oct. 29, 2019).

"It is an example of GM's hypocrisy that they pretend to want to sell EVs when they're siding with President Trump to crush California's effort to increase the sale of EVs," Becker said.

Asked for comment, a GM spokeswoman redirected E&E News to a [press release](#) announcing the 30-second TV spot for the electric Hummer, which is slated for release in 2022.

"GMC builds premium and capable trucks and SUVs and the GMC HUMMER EV takes this to new heights," Duncan Aldred, vice president of Global Buick and GMC, said in the release. "We are excited to debut our revolutionary zero-emissions truck during the biggest night in TV advertising."

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