

VC-Backed HomeAway Making Big Play in Super Bowl Ad Debut

By Alastair Goldfisher

It's that time of the year again, when I and 90 million or so other viewers worldwide will watch the Super Bowl this Sunday. I'm hoping for a great game. (Go Saints!) But I also will have a keen eye on the ads.



This has been an annual pursuit of mine since the mid-1990s when I covered tech marketing for the Silicon Valley Business Journal. Back then it was like shooting fish in a barrel because every tech company and dot-com startup, flush with capital, spent a large portion of their VC dollars on nifty ad campaigns. It didn't do much good for Pets.com, but the Siren's call of reaching millions of viewers is still alluring.

This year, I can find only one VC-backed company that will pony up the money and air an ad during the Super Bowl.

And that company is HomeAway, which is backed by Institutional Venture Partners, Redpoint Ventures, Austin Ventures and Technology Crossover Ventures, among others.

In its Super Bowl debut, HomeAway, an Austin, Texas-based online vacation rental listing service, reunites actors Chevy Chase and Beverly D'Angelo in their roles as Clark and Ellen Griswold from the 1980's-era comedy "National Lampoon's Vacation." Check out the sneak peak below.

I contacted Todd Chaffee, general partner at IVP, to ask what his thoughts are about the ad and I mentioned how it reminded me a little bit of the dot-com ads of the late 1990s.

HomeAway isn't some concept dot-com company, Chaffee said.

"Yes, the HomeAway Super Bowl campaign is similar to the ads run by technology companies in the late 1990s, except HomeAway has a proven business model, an exceptional management team, state-of-the-art technology, global market

leadership, unprecedented ROI for its customers, large and rapidly growing revenues, impressive margins and huge positive cash flows. Need I continue?" he said.

Of course, HomeAway isn't the only tech company to air an ad during Super Bowl XLIV. Boost Mobile (reprising the Super Bowl Shuffle), Cars.com, Careerbuilder, E-Trade (please, no more talking babies), Motorola, Qualcomm and even a toned-down GoDaddy (uggh, why bother?) will all compete to get our attention. Electronic Arts will air its first ever SB ad during the fourth quarter for its "Dante's Inferno" game.

Monster Worldwide, fresh off of its \$225 million acquisition of HotJobs from Yahoo is running an ad during the first quarter. Before the HotJobs deal, the jobs site was already planning its return to the Super Bowl this year with a fiddling beaver ad, part of its "Get a Monster Advantage" campaign to promote its "6Sense" job search engine. The little bugger of a beaver even Tweeted me. He's at @BusyFiddler.

HomeAway was almost one of two VC-backed companies to air a Super Bowl ad. Thankfully, CBS rejected the ad of KGB, sparing us all of seeing computer-generated images of guys walking around with their heads up their asses. I'm not joking here. KGB, f.k.a. Infonxx, is a New York-based provider of directory assistance services and counts Technology Crossover Ventures as its shareholder.

The company's proposed ad, which you can see on YouTube, features two golfer wives complaining about their no-good husbands. "He's got his head up his ass," one says, while the husband roams around with his head physically inserted up his butt.

"Next time your husbands don't have a clue, make sure they text KGB."

With a confusing name like KGB and a text-service that unknown, an ad during the Super Bowl would have confused too many viewers.

Marketing expert Scott Hamula, an associate professor at Ithaca College, explained to me that those with small budgets need to be super creative to get attention and keep it for their presumably 30 seconds of fame.

“There is nothing like the Super Bowl in the world for getting attention from consumers and media outlets,” Hamula said.

I know. Between plays, there will be no shortage of celebrity cameos, talking animals, movie trailers, car ads and commercials for snacks, soft drinks and beer.

But, really, the only thing a lot of people want to see is a football game.