



A Marketer's Playbook For Winning the Big Game

Written by
Brad Johnsmeyer
Allison Mooney

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THE **RUNDOWN**

Football may have taken some hits this year, but judging by the numbers, the sport's popularity is at an all-time high. This is good news for advertisers who invest heavily in this cultural moment. And by going beyond the traditional TV spot, they can reach more fans in more ways than ever.

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For many Americans, there are two times of year: football season and waiting for football season. And despite football's rough year in the public eye, this hasn't changed. In the U.S., the sport's popularity remains incredibly, unwaveringly high—higher than any other sports league, according to [Google Search data](#). Even this year's preseason events drew massive interest; [searches for "NFL Draft"](#) are up year over year. We're seeing this not only through searches but in viewership numbers as well. [Nielsen data](#) shows the NFL's rapid rise over the past decade, handily beating the top 10 network shows.

It seems safe to bet that this February's "big game" will be one of the biggest yet. For brands, this is great news. Many invest heavily in marketing to football's vast U.S. audience, especially around the Super Bowl. Traditionally, that's taken the form of big-budget commercials aired during the game. But new consumer behaviors are widening the window of interest and opportunity, and smart brands are getting in on the action.

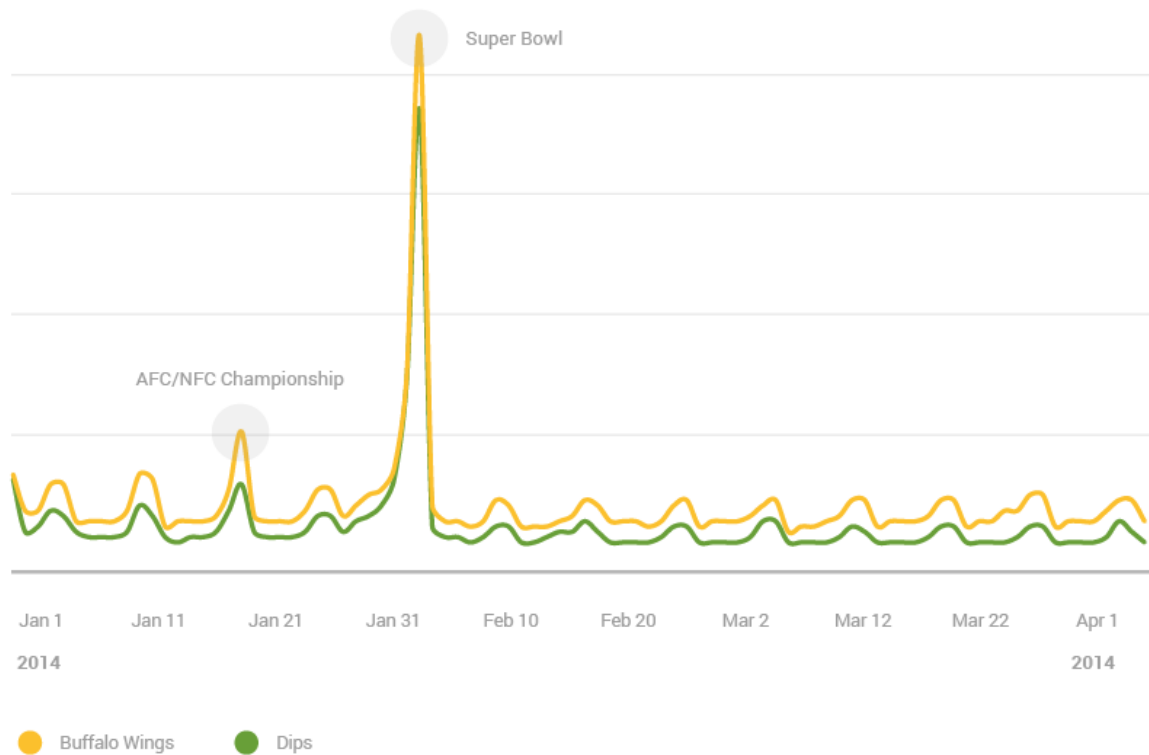
A month-long series of moments

During Sunday's big game, fans will surely be sporting team jerseys, tailgating, painting their faces, and cheering with foam fingers held high. But that's far from all. Through digital, there are more ways than ever for people to engage with football, and it's not just limited to game day. The run-up to the big game and week following are [full of moments that matter](#)—moments of curiosity, interest, and intent when fans turn to search. According to Google and YouTube data, in the month leading up to the game, fans are wondering:

“What should I bring to the tailgate?”

- Searches for recipes were up 10% in 2014 YoY.
- On Sundays during the playoffs, searches for “buffalo wings” take off and “dip” spikes (see chart 1).
- When it comes to [buffalo wings](#), more people are looking to bake them than ever before. And they’re most popular in Omaha, not in their hometown of Buffalo.

Searches for “Buffalo Wings” and “Dips”

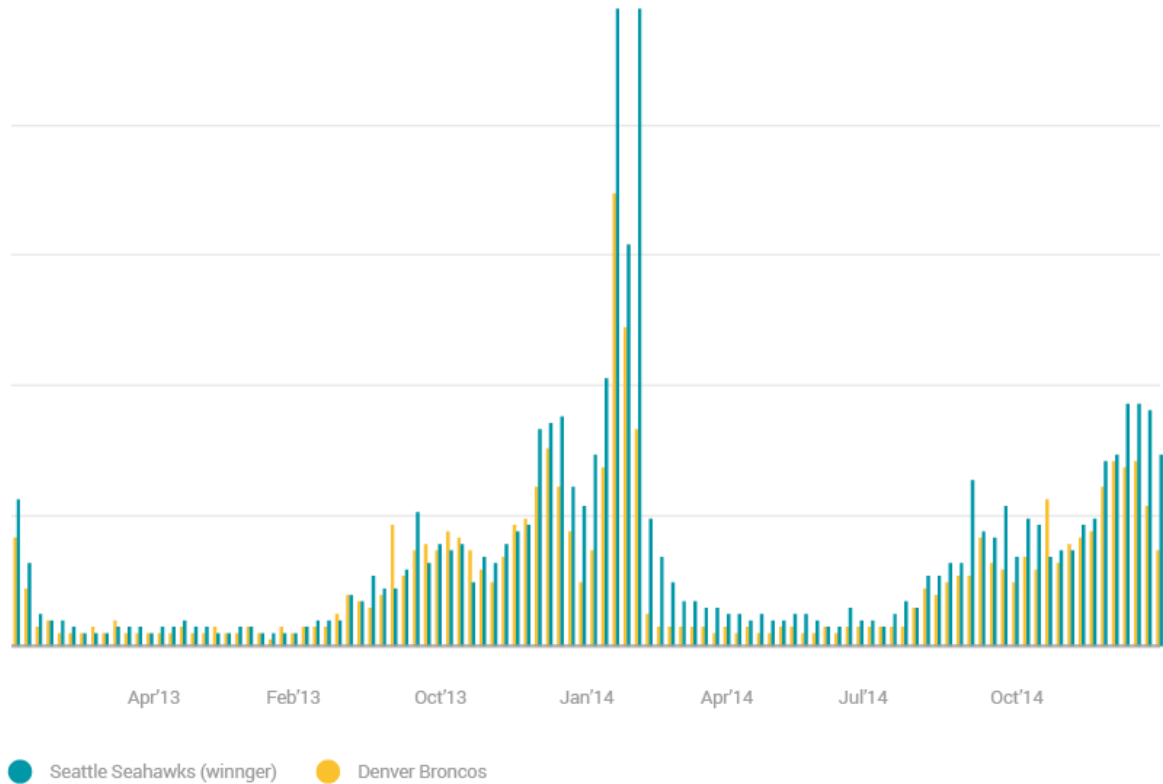


Source: Google Data, Jan 2014–Mar 2014, United States.

“What should I wear to the game?”

- Searches for apparel get intense once the playoffs start, then peak again when we know who won.

Apparel Searches for Teams in the 2014 Super Bowl



Source: Google Trends, Jan 2014–Jan 2015, Apparel Category, United States.

- Last year was all about the [beanie](#). This year, “[ugly NFL sweaters](#)” are trending in the Apparel category, up 700% in the last 90 days.

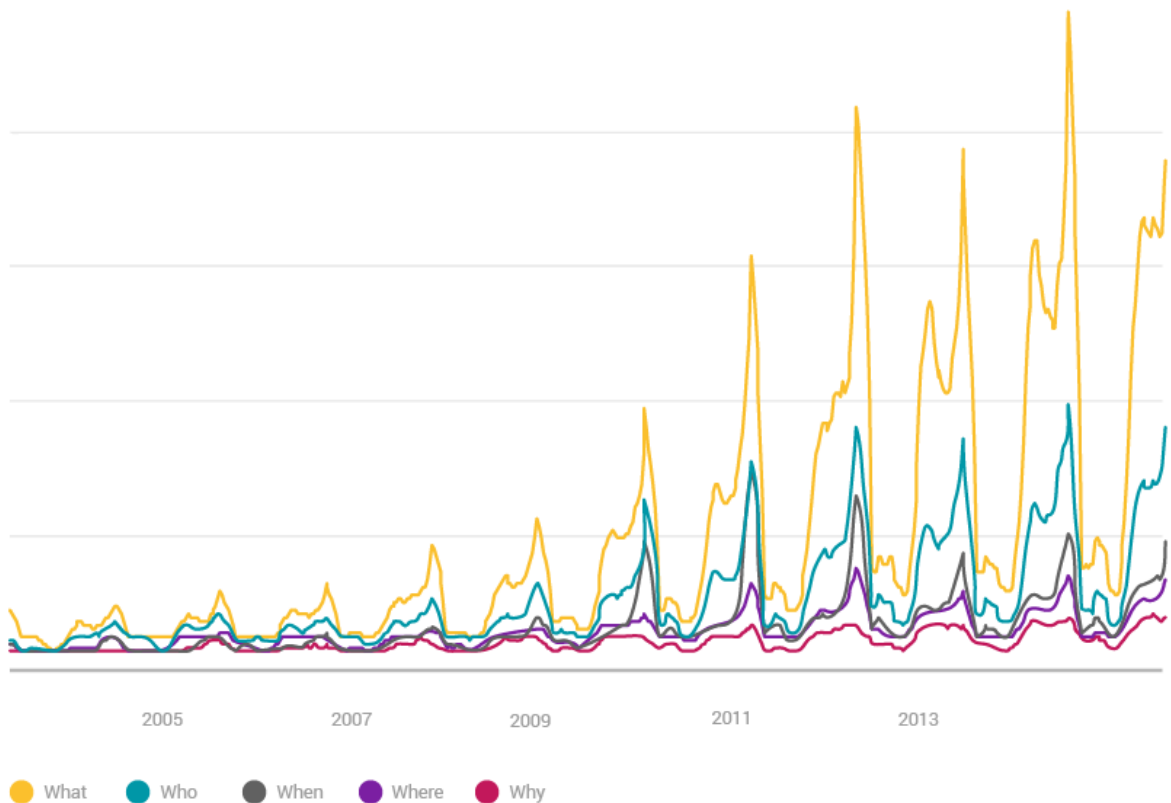
“What’s the weather going to be?”

- People start looking up the [weather forecast for Super Bowl Sunday](#) at the beginning of January and interest grows steadily as game day draws nearer.

“So ... what is happening, exactly?”

- People are asking more [questions about football](#) throughout the year, especially at the beginning of the season (September) and right before the playoffs (January). These are both times when watching football becomes a larger social activity, attracting more casual fans and newbie viewers.
- To understand the action and keep up in conversation, they’re searching for quick answers. “Who plays football tonight,” “how many players on a football team,” “what is a safety in football,” and “when was football invented” are all commonly asked questions.

Searches for Question Words in the Football Category



Source: Google Trends, Jan 2004–Jan 2015, American Football category, United States.

Sports fans mobilize for the big game

We don't "go online" anymore—we live online. What we once called "online sessions" have given way to mobile behavior, especially for sports fans, who prize deep knowledge and immediacy. In the heat of the moment, we quickly reach for a smartphone. It's as reflexive as the snap is for a quarterback.

This means mobile has become an incredibly important way to reach sports fans, especially during games themselves. While away from a big screen, fans rely on their smartphone to stay on top of the action in real time. If they're watching live, they're second screening during lulls in the action—talking trash with friends or gathering facts and stats. According to Google data:

- Mobile queries related to football were up 50% YoY in December.
- Top mobile searches include players, teams, schedules, and scores—all are growing annually.
- During games, there's a big surge in mobile searches. During week 1 of the playoffs, for example, 78% of game-related searches came from smartphones.

Leaning in to watch the ads

Online video has changed the game for sports. It lets fans relive hits and highlights from recent and classic games, research teams and players, even learn how to play themselves. But of course, this time of year, it's all about watching ads online—before the game for a sneak peak and after the game to see the most buzzed-about spots. In 2014, Super Bowl ads on YouTube were watched more than 160M times before game day, according to YouTube data.

As audiences turn to YouTube to extend the shared experience of their favorite events, brands have an even bigger window in which to engage them. Stay tuned for Think with Google's look at how consumers are using YouTube to deepen the fan experience and what brands are doing to get in on the action.

A marketer's playbook for winning the big game

The “big game” will be one of the biggest yet, and much of the audience is online. Marketers can reach millions of fans—from the diehard to the casual—through search, mobile, and video. And the opportunity isn't just on game day; it spans a month-long series of digital moments. Here's how brands can get in on the action:

- The run-up to the game and the week following are [full of moments that matter](#). Be there in these moments with messages, content, and experiences that respond to their questions and queries, whether that's a recipe for buffalo wings, an ad for an ugly sweater, or a cheat sheet for tonight's game.
- On any given Sunday, fans will be clutching their smartphone. Whatever you're planning, think about the experience on mobile before anything else. Make ads for small screens; don't just downsize desktop creative. Create mobile web experiences and apps that take full advantage of the platform. For more winning strategies, read our latest [Mobile Playbook](#).
- In 2014, fans spent a staggering 14 million hours watching the top 10 Super Bowl and World Cup ads featured in our annual [Ads Rewind](#). Seventy-five percent of those hours were earned before or after the day of the Super Bowl or the month of the World Cup. Before, during, and after the big game, engage the community with event-centric content. Think about what they may be interested in (hint: look at what they're searching for) and follow a [help, hub, hero strategy](#).
- When making content for YouTube, [take all the time you need](#) to tell compelling, memorable brand stories. The top 10 ads on YouTube in 2014 averaged three minutes in length. There's no time limit on the ads consumers choose to watch; they are happy to stay tuned if the content stays interesting.
- During playoff games and the Super Bowl itself, think about how your brand can connect with people in the moment, not take them out of it. To do that, [rethink real time](#) by starting with the data, adding to the experience, planning for possibilities, and making companions, not campaigns. Programmatic also represents a key technology solution to capture this opportunity at scale.



Brad Johnsmeyer
Analytical Insights Marketing, Google



Allison Mooney
Head of Trends & Insights, Google