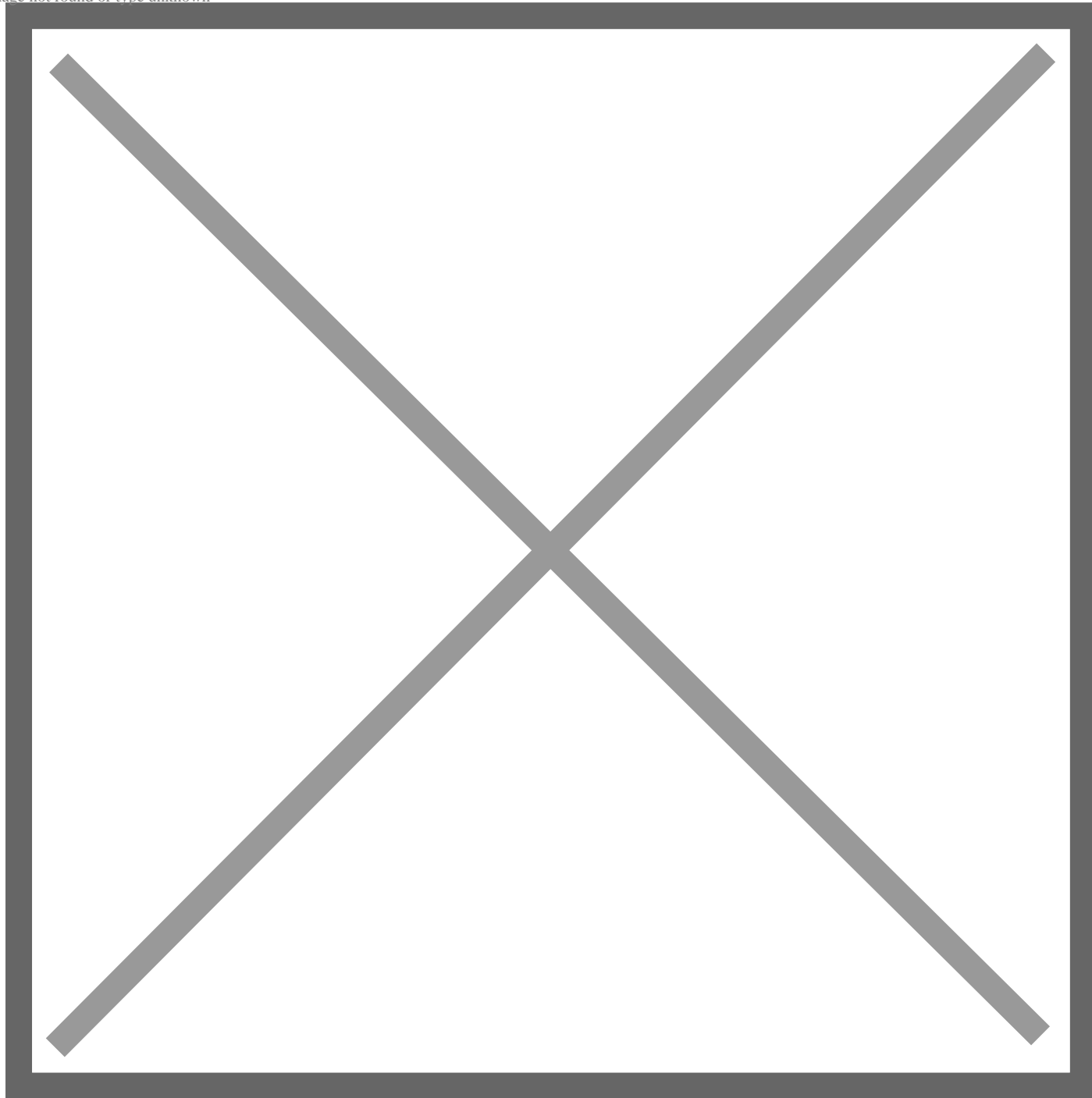


24. The Big Game: The Making of a Big Ad

February 07, 2020

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Every year, football's biggest game launches the year's biggest television ads, and Toyota and Lexus are no exception. This year it was Toyota's turn with "Heroes," an epic super hero—Super Mom—spot featuring Stumptown and How I Met Your Mother star, Cobie Smulders. We'll hear from our own big game ad experts,

Mia Phillips and Dan Nied, as well as Saatchi & Saatchi Executive Creative Director, John Payne, to go behind the scenes to learn how it all comes together by kickoff.

Full transcript below.

Kelsey Soule: Welcome back to another episode of Toyota Untold. This is Kelsey. And Tyler will be with us shortly. So, in this episode, we get to Monday morning quarterback, Toyota's ad from that super big game that comes once a year around this time. On average, approximately, like over a hundred million viewers see the commercials created for this major sporting event. It was obviously a really big deal for brands. We know that there are those people who watch the game solely for the ads. If that's you, hello. And depending on your team, you may find the ads a welcome break from the score board. But fans of every team and sport really can root for their favorite ad spot.

So, today, we're gonna talk to our own key players that are key in preparations for our super fun, superhero, super spot. And if you saw it, you get where I'm going there. On deck to break it down for us are Mia Phillips, Senior Manager of Lexus Advertising and Media. And until recently, she was the Senior Manager of CUV, crossover vehicles for Toyota Marketing.

We'll also talk to John Payne who's the Executive Creative Director for Saatchi & Saatchi, our ad agency of record, who produced the spot. And finally, we're gonna hear from our part-time correspondent, Dan Nied, who works in Toyota Internal Communications. He was on the set for the ad as they filmed.

A note before we get started, hopefully, this isn't too obstructive to your listening, but we can't actually say the name of the football game that grabs viewers' attention every year. I don't know if you knew this, but really, you're not allowed to say the name of it. So, you're going to hear us refer to it generically. So, the clock is about to begin. Let's kick it off with Mia Phillips.

We have with us today, Mia Phillips. Welcome to the podcast.

Mia Phillips: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Kelsey Soule: So, can you tell us a little bit about your role at Toyota/Lexus? And then also your involvement in Super Bowl ads as a whole?

Mia Phillips: Yeah. So, currently I am the Senior Manager of Lexus Advertising and Media. I've been in the role of 40 days. Woohoo!

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: And previous to that, I was at Toyota and on the marketing side, the Senior Manager of Crossover Utility Vehicles for the Vehicle Marketing and Communications team. So, the jobs are very similar, I would say, where the Lexus jobs starts is a little bit different than where the Toyota job starts and ends. So, Lexus, I do have responsibility for media, which I did not have on the Toyota side. There is a separate media manager. We are responsible for advertising and not necessarily the product marketing strategy-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... which on the Toyota side, I was responsible for the advertising and-

Kelsey Soule: And both, okay.

Mia Phillips: ... the product marketing strategy.

Kelsey Soule: Gotcha.

Mia Phillips: Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: So, on both ends of your job, just advertising, in general, falls into your responsibility.

Mia Phillips: Yes.

Kelsey Soule: Awesome.

Mia Phillips: Yes, on both sides of the house. Yes.

Kelsey Soule: And so, in your role at Toyota, when it came to the game, I think it's important for customers to know how do we pick which car is featured in any of our ads?

Mia Phillips: So, I have had the great fortune over the course of the last three years to be involved in three of Toyota's ads. The first ad was actually in a year where we were not launching any new product. So, we didn't have any brand-new product reveal, any full model changes or major model changes that we were announcing

In that case, a lot of times, if we are to move forward, we'll focus on attributes of the brand that we want consumers to know more about. And so, that particular year, we focused on the brand, and we had a brand ad, which featured the Toyota Tundra and to a lesser extent, some other Toyotas that were in the background, but mostly the Toyota Tundra. And also, that year, we ran Olympics work-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... really as a test to get ready for the upcoming Olympics and just understand how we were impacting the marketplace. In the years where we're actually launching a vehicle, so a wintertime launch, which was the case last year with Rav4, we will actually focus on that vehicle for the launch. Last year was a little bit different because although we had Rav4 that was technically already on sale from December the previous year, we also had Supra that was coming up-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... in the summer. And obviously, Supra is a halo vehicle. Everybody in the world wants to know when Toyota was coming back with Supra.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: And so, we had the great fortune from a media perspective of another brand dropping out at the last minute-

Kelsey Soule: Oh.

Mia Phillips: ... and there being a spot opened up. And so, while we had anticipated and created specifically for RAV4 to run, we had another opportunity and had a Supra ad that we were preparing for Daytona actually-

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Mia Phillips: ... that we moved forward and put in that second slot that became available.

Kelsey Soule: Now, I doubt that it just became available and they let you have it, right? Like, you know, who would pay for it?

Mia Phillips: Oh, yeah. We had to pay. Yeah, yeah. That would be nice, you know.

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: We did have to pay, yeah.

Kelsey Soule: And I mean, obviously, when it comes to advertising, the giant game, where they played football, is the mecca of advertising in the United States, right? I mean, and across the world.

Mia Phillips: Yeah, it really is. It's-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: It's the only time ... it's not the only time, obviously, that someone sees a commercial, but it's the one time where people are actually watching for commercials.

Kelsey Soule: Right. So then, obviously, it's quite an expensive spot. But there has to ... and the viewership is ... is insane. I mean, it's ... you said 111 million people

Mia Phillips: Yes.

Kelsey Soule: So, how do we determine how many spots we want to have and how long they are?

Mia Phillips: Yeah, that's a great question. So, we do measure. There are different types of measurement. I'll give you an example. So, last year with RAV4, typically, what we have used in the past as one of the KPIs is USA Today's ad meter.

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Mia Phillips: So, ad meter allows consumers to go on up to ... I think it's 24 hours before the Super Bowl, and rank and rate all of the ads that are going to be run. And so, you really get a really good feel for how your ad is comparing in terms of popularity with the rest of the ads. That is typically one of our metrics. With last year's ad, we were touting hybrid technology, which wasn't at an all-time high in popularity. A lot of misconceptions around-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... hybrids and what they bring to the table. We were focusing on a female, an African-American female football player, which isn't necessarily something you hear about every day.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: And so, we questioned whether ad meter was going to give us the right read on whether or not-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... we were reaching consumers. So, we looked at other reads. Some of those reads were other metrics that we have other research companies that we leverage to tell us how ... what our voice, shared voice is, how frequently people are talking about our ads-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... and is that sentiment negative or positive. And in addition to ad meter, which actually Toni was the name of the Rav4 spot, showed up in the top 20 as did Supra's spot-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... showed up in the top 20. But when you started to look at other metrics and how many people visited the toyota.com site-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... and looked up Rav4 or Supra afterwards, we, by far, as a manufacturer with both Toni and the pinball spot, which was the Supra ad, had more visits to our website. Our website visits spiked that day.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah. How do we ... I mean, we would have never known that the reach would have gone as far as it did, right? We knew that it had ... there was a powerful story there and that there was a connection with the brand. But I mean, is it just luck, like you know which person to pick or which storyline to follow? Which creative element to select in order to get that ROI?

Mia Phillips: Yeah. That, you know, it's really interesting. And I ... I give all kudos and credit to our agency partners who work on the creative for these ads. And so, when we sat down with our agency partners and talked about really the mood and the manner that we were looking to bring to life on the screen, we had an objective. Ed Laukes, our Chief Marketing Officer for Toyota, laid out a really clear objective. He wanted something on screen that was going to make the dealers and the folks who work for Toyota proud-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... of working for Toyota. And at the same time, he wanted to get across the message that we are a new Toyota, an innovative, exciting Toyota, and something that consumers could emotionally connect to. The agencies came back to the table and told us that the year prior, I think was all kind of crier ads where everybody wanted to cry.

Kelsey Soule: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mia Phillips: And they couldn't really tell whether it was going to lean really heavily funny because some years lean very heavily that all of the commercials are trying to be funny.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah. I'm like, how do you know? Like how did the agencies figure out whether it's a funny year? I mean, you really have to consider all things that are going on in popular culture, and in politics, and everything because you can miss something and fall really flat if you're not aware of what's relevant.

Mia Phillips: You know what, we looked ... I think again, what you nailed is that our agencies do a great job in researching beforehand what's happening in popular culture, what's happening socioeconomically-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... what is happening in terms of everything that's going on in America. And I think that at that time, most of the ads that we saw were in the charming-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... area. I think that, you know, given some of what was happening politically and socioeconomically, it didn't make sense for us to come in with a super serious message, but the message itself was serious.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: And in that one team message, really, it was a divisive time. I think as-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah, of course.

Mia Phillips: ... as many of the times are these days, you can't pick just one.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: But I think that there were some device ... there was some divisiveness happening-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... happening at the time. And to say that we are all on one team and at the same time, you know, our other ad was on the Olympics and-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... team America, it just-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... it worked out beautifully. And so, it's ... it is really tapping into what is currently happening in America.

Kelsey Soule: So, do you think from a brand perspective, Toyota, Lexus, any of them, they use ... when they want to launch a new rebrand or a new platform, like for us telling the world that we're a mobility company, we decided to do that at the game. So, do you think a lot of companies take that opportunity to use that platform to kind of reintroduce themselves?

Mia Phillips: I think that it makes a lot of sense. It depends on what ...you know, at the end of the day, what you're trying to accomplish-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... within ... within, I would say, that 60-90-day period-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... leading up, and that includes the lead up time. You're not at any other time in the year going to have 111 million people watching at the same time.

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: So, there is really only one opportunity to get a mass message out, and you hope that it has enough resonance with the people that are watching that the conversations can continue after the ad has run. The idea is a lot of times that you will leverage that ad and run it in usually a 30 second format if you're one of the larger brands that have a 60 second buy-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... throughout the remainder of year.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah, okay.

Mia Phillips: And so, that conversation can continue. So, for ... in the case of Toni, initially, we were not planning to run it as a 30 second ad, but because it did catch fire like we did-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... we ended up making a cut down to 30 seconds. And it's still running actually if you watch Sunday night or Thursday night football.

Kelsey Soule: I didn't know that.

Mia Phillips: You'll see Toni every now and then, and it's still driving incredible metrics for us.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah, nice.

Mia Phillips: So, it does give a brand an opportunity that if you don't have the funds to do it at any other time-

Kelsey Soule: Now's the time.

Mia Phillips: ...you can get 111 million people, right, in one swath.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah. My biggest fear, I guess, would be as an advertiser is that 111 million people with 111 different opinions. So, you know, how are you ... you know, even if you had the best of intentions to take a stand on something, there's always going to be some portion that doesn't agree. Yeah, it's a big opportunity, but it's also a huge risk.

Mia Phillips: It is. I think it is. You're absolutely right. And ... and that's why ... well, and I'm sure no one goes into it lightly because as we talked about, it's cost prohibitive.

Kelsey Soule: It's expensive.

Mia Phillips: [00:13:24] So, you don't go into that opportunity lightly. And we actually work very closely with, uh, our friends over in the Consumer Insights Group.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: Shout out to John Ciarletta and team. We work very closely with them to test before it ever even hits television to understand whether or not people are understanding our message, if it's rubbing them the wrong way. And you'd be amazed at what little things make a difference-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... like music, music can make a huge difference in whether someone perceives an ad positively or negatively, gets motivated and inspired or brought down by it.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: So, we do testing with ... with music. We do testing with alternative endings. We do a lot of testing to understand what kind of impact our ... our ad is going to have. And that's why I would say for the most part, you'll see that Toyota and Lexus hit the mark with their ads.

Kelsey Soule: So, when you test, do you test with people of all ... like all ages, all demographics, all nationalities, or do you think about the ad and say you're picking a car, and you're really trying to hit a demographic with this car. Do you focus on the feedback from that ... that group?

Mia Phillips: Yeah. So, that's a great question. With Rav4, for example, because it was hybrid technology, we had a boost of hybrid intenders-

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Mia Phillips: ... that we tested in addition to testing everyone. So, typically, you are testing across the gap for gender and age. We try to get 50/50 – 50 male, female. We try to get an age distribution. We tried to make sure that all ethnic groups are covered in that. And so, we do get a certain number of sample from each one of the ethnic groups to make sure that we have a valid sample. In addition, if it is a special vehicle, like a hybrid vehicle, we'll also test hybrid intenders-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... versus non intenders-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... to see if our message is resonating with those who probably wouldn't even have been considering a hybrid, which in this case, we absolutely had to do that-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... with the goals

Kelsey Soule: For sure. Another question that we had that I think might be fun, if you can talk about it, are ideas that didn't make it. So, I think we love talking ... we've talked to so many people about how ... I don't remember how many years ago it was, but when we are introducing the Sienna, there was like a Swagger Wagon ad that people really liked. But there's gotta be funny, or charming, or just ads that were great ideas that just didn't make the cut. Can you think of any that would be, like, relevant to talk about?

Mia Phillips: Yeah. So, I'll talk about last years with RAV4. We had a couple of spots that actually rose to the top at the end. There were three. There was Toni. There was another spot that was going to be filmed in Chicago. Actually, it was going to be filmed in New York, but it was a Chicago versus New York theme, and it was called Fork or Fold around how you like your pizza-

Kelsey Soule: Oh, pizza. Nice.

Mia Phillips: ... and using the RAV4 hybrid to really kind of indicate speed but, also, indicate distance in that case. And we were talking about having celebrity sightings.

Kelsey Soule: Oh, man.

Mia Phillips: We had a spot, "The Four Chris's." So, a lot of people always get the Chris, the ... the actors confused. There's Chris, the one that is-

Kelsey Soule: Oh, like Chris Hemsworth?

Mia Phillips: Yes.

Kelsey Soule: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. And then, wait, that's Liam. Liam Hemsworth's brother.

Mia Phillips: Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: Liam Hemsworth.

Mia Phillips: Yeah, Chris Pratt.

Kelsey Soule: Chris Pratt, Chris Pine.

Mia Phillips: Chris Pine, that's it.

Kelsey Soule: Yes.

Mia Phillips: So, it was going to be those three Chris's. And then, we were going to try to see if we could throw in a Chris Rock, right? Like the four Chris's and do something. But at the end of the day, we really thought that's going ... those people are going to way over shine Rav4.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah

Mia Phillips: And so, we let go of that spot early, but we held on to the Fork or Fold where we thought we might be able to have it. We could still use Chris. I don't know why we were on Chris Rock last year. We ... we were in this Chris Rock thing. We're like, "We can use him--"

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: "... for the New York versus Chicago pizza."

Kelsey Soule: Oh, yeah.

Mia Phillips: And then, the last one had no celebrities. It was really around uniting folks again. So, it was similar to "One Team" and ... but ... but it was more using average folks, police officers, and firefighters, and ... and kind of taking a stand on our vehicle is really made for everyone and-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: ... kind of showing it going across the US with people getting in and out of the car. It's interesting because Uber ended up pulling off something like that for their revived brand work.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: And we talked about, "Well, let's not make it like an Uber."

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: "This has to be specific around RAV4." And I think at the end of the day, and a lot of people were leaning towards that, they like the feel of that, and it was going to be one of those more emotional heartstringy with the voiceover that we were looking to use type of ads. But the Toni ad came up and just the imagery of her and being so small but powerful and fighting odds, and our hybrid, again, being small-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Mia Phillips: ... but powerful and fighting odd, just that-

Kelsey Soule: Just worked.

Mia Phillips: ... that tension just worked.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Mia Phillips: And so, at the end of the day, we went with that one and not the other. And glad that we did. I think everybody would say that we're glad that we went that direction.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah. Well, it sounds like you have one of the most fun jobs at Toyota and Lexus, so thank you so much for joining us today.

Mia Phillips: Thank you. I had a great time.

Kelsey Soule: And now, we'll find out what it was like on the set of our ad. Our colleague, Dan Nied, who, like I said, is from Internal Communications, and he goes out as, sometimes, our part-time correspondent, got to visit the set and witness several of the scenes as they were filmed. He also got to hang out with the star of our spot, Cobie Smulders a.k.a Robin Sparkles.

This is Kelsey. And today on Toyota Untold, we are with our dear friend and part-time correspondent, Dan Nied, from Corporate Communications. Dan, welcome to the podcast.

Dan Nied: Great. Thanks for having me.

Kelsey Soule: Okay. So, Dan, we're going to get your perspective. Dan had the opportunity to sit in on the filming of our ad that was featured yesterday during the giant game where they play football and J. Lo was at the halftime show.

Dan Nied: Yeah. I got to sit in on parts of it with Toyota Marketing and with Saatchi & Saatchi a little bit because of this other project that we're working on. And it was really interesting, really eye opening, especially as someone who's kind of consumed that kind of media commercials from this game for-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... forever.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah. And I think that the commercials from this game specifically are really elusive to people because, obviously, there's a lot of money that goes into the advertising; and therefore, the creative process begins. I think Mia Phillips said it was like six months, eight months prior. So, you got to do kind of the end where they're filming the final creative idea that they've picked, the one that they've selected. Can you tell us like where you were and what ... just like set the scene? Tell us like what it looked like.

Dan Nied: Sure. So, where we started was actually kind of in the middle of the process where Saatchi & Saatchi were coming up with ideas, and they're trying to figure out what this ad was going to be. And they had a lot of ideas that they threw around that sounded really good to me. Where they settled was with what we saw yesterday with Cobie Smulders and kind of being the hero and going around, picking up all these different characters. And they were ... you know, our marketing department was generous enough to allow us on the commercial set, which they filmed all around Los Angeles. We were there for two nights. They're very long.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: The first one was in Simi Valley, in the mountains-

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: ... which is kind of in Ventura County, about an hour outside of LA. And you think it's going to be in Los Angeles. And so-

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Dan Nied: ... Southern California. So, I think it's going to be nice and, at least, tolerable weather-wise, but it was windy and cold and one of the most miserable experiences I've had as far as the weather goes.

Kelsey Soule: Fun.

Dan Nied: And then, the next night, we were in downtown LA. What I was really kind of shocked by was how it was a big production-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... but in a very small concentrated area. So, I think from what we saw from our time in Simi Valley, which was I believe the alien scene that was in the commercial, everything was kind of concentrated in this like maybe 30-square-foot area where the car was there, Cobie was there, the crew was all around, the other actors were in the car, and they had this giant light that almost looked like a UFO that was ... that was on top of them. I remember it's pitch dark outside. You're in the mountains. There's no lights.

Kelsey Soule: But you're outside.

Dan Nied: Yeah, you're outside, and the wind's blowing, and it's going crazy. And it was just kind of ... it's kind of surreal experience just to see it. It really looked like something where a spaceship could have been landed in the set. The next night, the move to LA, which was much more tolerable as far as weather goes, and I was wondering how they were going to shoot this in downtown LA. Call time was 6:00 p.m. So, we show up, and it's basically in this parking lot that, apparently, we've rented out

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: ... and against one wall is the shoot. It's, again, a very small area where they're shooting. And then, the rest of this parking lot is trailers and everything coming in. And, again, all these people gathered around. So, it's one thing. It was hard to kind of tell what was going on sometimes.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: The director is a guy named Tim Bullock, who did a wonderful job of this commercial. And he would kind of ... you know, he would do what you think a director does. He just stands there, and watches, and call the action, calls cut. And right next to him was John Payne-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... who is Saatchi & Saatchi's-

Kelsey Soule: ... from Saatchi.

Dan Nied: ... Creative Director who ... a very hands-on role in creating this.

Kelsey Soule: So, you said that it's in this like really small space but like is the car moving? Like are they making it look like it moves?

Dan Nied: So, the car moves.

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: But what we saw ... the main things that we saw those two nights, we didn't see the car move until around 11:00 p.m. on Monday night, which was a final night of shooting. They shut down a street in downtown Los Angeles.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... to get rain scenes. So, they had like a rain. Basically, what it is, is a giant sprinkler.

Kelsey Soule: I was going to say, yeah. It wasn't raining, I'm sure.

Dan Nied: It was definitely not raining, but it was like ... it was a rain machine that

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: ... really kind of created a downpour. And so, the car moved through that area. So, stopped in front of the theater to pick up her "son"-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... and kind of moved on. It was really intriguing. It was like being on a movie set.

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Dan Nied: Exactly what you would think, but it was equal parts exhilarating, intriguing, and boring.

Kelsey Soule: Okay. So, then, from your work on the Highlander project and kind of watching this car evolve from, you know, concept, all the way to the line off, and through this ad, how big of a deal do you think this ad is in how it contributes to the whole marketing campaign for the car?

Dan Nied: So, that's one thing that we talked about early on was because sometimes, every new car has its ad campaign.

Kelsey Soule: Sometimes, you get lucky and it falls during the right time. Right?

Dan Nied: If you remember last year, they had ... RAV4 was our big-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... hero vehicle and the RAV4 campaign and the RAV4 commercial had nothing to do with each other. So, we were ... we're asking the questions. This can be part of the campaign. It turns out this is the launch of the campaign-

Kelsey Soule: Oh, okay.

Dan Nied: And the campaign is “Go Highlander.” That’s the tagline. And it’s-

Kelsey Soule: That ad is the launch. It’s the start of the Highlander ad.

Dan Nied: Yeah. So, what you saw yesterday was the first “Go Highlander” commercial. And I know that ... it was developed by Saatchi & Saatchi, but I know that Toyota’s other ad agencies, which is Intertrend,

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... and Conill all have their versions of “Go Highlander” ad for their market. So, it was a big deal. And especially-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... with the size of what Highlander is in that segment because that is what may be the most competitive segments in the automotive industry, especially with Ford getting rid of all of their sedans-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... they’re putting more money into things, into the Explorer.

Kelsey Soule: Right. So, we got to compete.

Dan Nied: Yeah. And Highlander, as we all know, is number one in that segment.

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Dan Nied: 250,000 sales a year.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: So, this is actually really high stakes’ game to try to stay at the top of that segment.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: And the “Go Highlander” campaign is a huge part of that.

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Dan Nied: So, it’s kind of like how it meshes. You have the product. The new Highlander’s amazing, but you have to have the campaign to kind of tell people that.

Kelsey Soule: Right. You’re going to have to sell it in order to get people to go to dealers and try it out. As a ... I mean, I’m saying this because I know you and you can tell me if I’m wrong, but as a major consumer of ads-

Dan Nied: Right, sure.

Kelsey Soule: ... avid sports watcher-

Dan Nied: Absolutely, yeah.

Kelsey Soule: So, a.k.a. major consumer of ads-

Dan Nied: Yes.

Kelsey Soule: ... how do you think that this ad compares to other ads, maybe not from yesterday but just from history? And then, previous Toyota ads?

Dan Nied: That's a good question. I felt like this ad fit within what the commercial landscape is and what it has been in recent history. I feel like-

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: ... it had an appropriate amount of grandeur. I feel like it had the kind of spot ... it shed the kind of spotlight on the Highlander that we want. And I feel like it told a good story that's going to resonate with people who may buy that car. As far as where it fits in with Toyota's ad, I think we've ... we're kind of on a hot streak as far as-

Kelsey Soule: It did pretty well, yeah.

Dan Nied: I mean, last year, you think we had the Toni Harris ad for the RAV4 that got a lot ... that really inspired a lot of people. We also had the surprise Supra ad with the pinball wizard, which was a really cool ad to have.

Kelsey Soule: And then, the year before, we had the Start Your Impossible, which I think ... like honestly, I think it topped the charts that year 'cause it was just on the ... on the-

Dan Nied: Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: ... inspirational side.

Dan Nied: And so, I think this is probably one that's going to get some people talking a little bit. Certainly, going to shed a lot of light on the car. And what is ... what I found interesting when they were planning for this is we kept hearing that Highlander had to be the star of this commercial because it was-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... really easy to just hire a celebrity like Cobie Smulders to come in and just be the face-

Kelsey Soule: Outshine.

Dan Nied: ... but then at the end, nobody knows what the ad is for.

Kelsey Soule: Right.

Dan Nied: Right? I think of the Baker Mayfield ads for Progressive that are running on-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... every football game right now or ran on every football game this season. And I really liked those ads, but it wasn't until about the 20th time I saw it that [crosstalk] -

Kelsey Soule: That you remembered what it was for.

Dan Nied: ... Progressive ad. For this, you know it's a Highlander.

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: The Highlander is the star, and Cobie Smulders is just kind of the secret to the sauce a little bit. And so, really, looking at who they were considering for-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... that role, I really don't think they could have done better than Cobie. We got to think that the people that are just becoming Highlander customers probably grew up a lot of ways with "How I Met Your Mother."

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: "How I Met Your Mother," which Cobie was a star of, "How I Met Your Mother" probably is kind of that ... that piece of popular culture for people that are maybe in their early 30s right now, that kind of told their stories. I'm a little older. So, mine is more like "Friends" and "Seinfeld."

Kelsey Soule: I think "How I Met Your Mother" like spans-

Dan Nied: Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: ... spans in age group because people watch ... Like I didn't watch it when it was on TV.

Dan Nied: Right, me either.

Kelsey Soule: So-

Dan Nied: Well, again, I caught up in-

Kelsey Soule: But I mean, also because it was like seven season, eight seasons.

Dan Nied: Nine.

Kelsey Soule: Nine seasons-

Dan Nied: Nine seasons.

Kelsey Soule: ... long, I mean, they caught a lot of people on either end-

Dan Nied: Oh, yeah.

Kelsey Soule: ... and then, the whole like replay. So, yeah, I mean, I think that it makes sense that she was a great strategic pick for the-

Dan Nied: Yeah, right.

Kelsey Soule: ... for the market they're trying to reach.

Dan Nied: And I ... and it's one of those things they ... talking to people about this earlier, who were going to pick for this role, and there were some names that were big names that-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... I was like, “Oh, that’d be cool. That’d be cool. That’d be cool.” And then, when they told me it was Cobie Smulders, you know, it’s not one of those things where you’re like immediate, like, “That’s amazing.” You’re like, “Okay, I know who that is, and that’s kind of cool.” And then, you start thinking about it, I’m like, “Yeah, this-“

Kelsey Soule: It’s this.

Dan Nied: “Not only is it Cobie Smulders, it should be Cobie Smulders.”

Kelsey Soule: Yeah. And we have a lot of ... I think we were talking with Mia. Like we have a lot of standards when it comes to-

Dan Nied: Oh yeah.

Kelsey Soule: ... who we let represent our brand. And so, obviously, she was a great fit.

Dan Nied: One thing real quick-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... before we move on from her is that just being on set, I was lucky enough I got to interview her because we ... some of our footage was used for the behind-the-scenes stuff that-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... Saatchi sent out. I have never in my life met a nicer person.

Kelsey Soule: That’s awesome.

Dan Nied: Like, I mean, it was ... like she ... the last night of shooting in downtown LA, she had a coffee truck brought in for the entire production. So, it’s just like ... well, I had a Thai Latte, I believe or chai ... I’m sorry, I had a chai latte, I believe. Thank you. Thank you, Cobie Smulders for that chai latte.

Kelsey Soule: That’s awesome.

Dan Nied: And she ... we walked over to her trailer to do this interview, and she came out, not a representative. It was her.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: And she’s like, “Guys, it’s really cold. Get in here.”

Kelsey Soule: Oh, that’s nice.

Dan Nied: And it’s just three people that she’s never met before.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: So, yeah.

Kelsey Soule: Solid pick. Okay. So, I think a lot of people wonder sometimes or when it comes to viewership, if something isn’t like outlandishly funny or does it make people cry, people kind of view them as of like a flop or something. But that’s not necessarily true when it comes to ads because, again, like what you said, if you’re

selling a car, what you're trying to do is just bring awareness to what you're selling, which is obviously the end goal. So, sometimes, our ... sometimes, for Toyota, we can be funny, we can be serious. What do you think ... what's your opinion on like our vibe? And how do you think we handle each mode – serious, funny?

Dan Nied: Right.

Kelsey Soule: And what ... how did you feel about this ad?

Dan Nied: What's really interesting is that we sat down and talked to Jack Hollis-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... who is the GM of Toyota-

Kelsey Soule: Toyota Division.

Dan Nied: GM of Toyota Division and Ed Laukes, who is the head of Marketing.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: They both talked about this philosophy that Toyota has about cheers and tears.

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... that if you're going to make people feel something, you have to either make them laugh, make them cheer, or make them cry, make them feel emotional-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... tears. And it seems like Toni Harris last year, that was a tears ad.

Kelsey Soule: Yup.

Dan Nied: But the Supra commercial was probably more of a cheers ad. So, I think this one really fits within the mold of what we are trying. We're trying to get those emotions. This was more of a funny ... more of a comedy ad.

Kelsey Soule: Okay.

Dan Nied: And it was just kind of really smart, really witty, and really something that ... it's going to ... it's going to cause some of those emotions to come-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... to the surface and give you a good feeling of what this car is. So, I thought they really did a great job of that.

Kelsey Soule: All right, Dan, thank you so much for joining us. And we will hear from Dan again soon because he is doing a documentary. Do you want to give a little teaser on that?

Dan Nied: Yeah. So, we ask the question, what happens between the reveal of a car and when it goes on sale, or commercial happens, and it just so happened when we were thinking about this idea that 2020 Highlander was becoming a thing. So, we started in New York. It's the New York Auto Show in April. And we kind of filmed

marketing, some manufacturing in Indiana, and some of our dealers just to see what kind of goes on behind the scenes of getting this car to the customer. So-

Kelsey Soule: Yeah.

Dan Nied: ... we should be seeing that in March. And we're really excited. We have a lot of work yet to do, but I think we're getting some really good stuff.

Kelsey Soule: Awesome. Becoming Highlander coming soon.

Dan Nied: Yes.

Kelsey Soule: Thanks, Dan.

Next, we get behind-the-scenes story of the creation of our ad. This is a great example of the untold part of Toyota Untold because we're really taking you behind the scenes of why we do what we do as a brand and really how we do it. So, after months of top-secret work on the spot, the creative process behind it can, now, be told. So, we welcome John Payne, Executive Creative Director for Saatchi & Saatchi and leader of the team that created our ad.

Tyler Litchenberger: Hey, everybody. And welcome to Toyota Untold. It is Monday morning, the day after the big game. I hope everyone is feeling well. We, of course, are going to talk about it because we had a commercial in-game last night that you hopefully saw. And if you didn't, don't worry. Just keep tuning in because we will hear about it because today, we have Executive Creative Director of Saatchi & Saatchi, John Payne, with us, who was one of the many hands involved in making sure that this commercial was amazing. It was a roller coaster of emotions. Happy ones, dramatic-filled ones. And he led the team that got this spot in the game. Welcome, John.

John Payne: Thanks. It's great to be here. Let's talk about the spot.

Tyler Litchenberger: So, for people who don't watch football, didn't see the game, or who may be having a few too many beverages and missed the spot, tell us ... give us an overview of the spot.

John Payne: Okay. Well, it's a really simple story but it's complex because it's like a four-part play.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: But the crux of the story is there's a hero. In this case, it's Cobie Smulders. And she's in the Highlander, the all-wheel drive Highlander. And she's going around scooping up heroes who are left behind. And then, Cobie Smulders comes wheeling up and very nonchalantly, she says, "Well, I got room. Hop in."

Tyler Litchenberger: Hop in.

John Payne: And that trope, that setup repeats itself, you know, three more times before we get to the end. And it gets more and more outrageous. And then, at the end, it kind of brings it all back down to earth when she pulls up and finds her son on the sidewalk in the rain, and his friends had just left him.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh no.

John Payne: You know, they all piled into the taxi cab, and there wasn't room for poor Brian. But luckily, Cobie pulls up, and saves the day again, and in he gets. And that's the end of the story. So, it's a really simple story, but it's four vignettes all strung together. So, it makes a pretty long script, but the idea is really simple.

Tyler Litchenberger: Comedy, drama, emotional? What are ... what did you want people to take away?

John Payne: That's funny 'cause, you know, sometimes, we make a conscious decision like, "Okay, we're gonna go for funny," or "We're gonna go for emotional," you know, are or, "Are we going to go for cool?" And this one, it was really fun because we got to mix comedy and drama. It's like the classic mask-

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:36:46] Yeah.

John Payne: ... of drama and comedy. And we literally did combine the two because we're setting up this really intense emotional situation where, you know, you think this person is doomed. And then, when Cobie comes wheeling in with her all-wheel drive, three-row Highlander and rolls the window down and says, "Hey, I got room. Hop in," she kinda takes the ... she deflates the balloon, and you get a big comic relief.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

John Payne: So, you know, the drama and the comedy are really working together in this. So, we didn't have to choose on this one. We got both.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's` awesome. Talk about the shoot, the process, and having Cobie on, like, on set. And what is that like? Is it pretty chill? Is it ... like paint us a picture of what shooting a commercial, a Super Bowl commercial looks like?

John Payne: Well, shooting any commercial is more than most people imagine. I think people see a commercial on TV, and they think, "Oh, well, they probably shot that last week.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

John Payne: But it's so much more involved in that. There's so many people. You know, you show up on set, and there's hundreds of people there, you know, as you've got lighting crews, camera crews, and-

Tyler Litchenberger: Grips.

John Payne: ... grips, and set designers, and artists, and makeup people, and trailers and ... so, it was the typical kind of three-ring circus when we showed up out there.

Tyler Litchenberger: Talk to us about kind of the arc of making a spot.

John Payne: It is an art form, that's for sure. And it takes much longer than anyone thinks.

Tyler Litchenberger: How long?

John Payne: We start working on it probably six to eight months before the actual game.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

John Payne: And it all starts with the brief. You know, the strategists, they go out in the field, and they talk to the people who are in the market for a three-row SUV. And they come back with all kinds of consumer insights. And we sort through those insights and find the one that we think is going to resonate the best. And from there, the creative team takes that insight, and we start writing stories.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: You know, and usually it's a pretty big group of creatives that sit down with it in the beginning. You know, there might be 25-30 people

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: ... that start the work. But over time, you know, it takes months to crack it. You know, as the weeks and the months go by, people drop off. They lose interest. You know, everyone starts off with this, you know, great enthusiasm, but then, reality sets in, and you realize how hard it is to crack it, and people drop off

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: And usually, it ends up at the end of the day, there's one team that came up with the idea. And so, it starts off really broad. It narrows down. And then, it gets really broad again. It's almost like an hourglass shape-

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

John Payne: ... because once you get that one idea, then you can bring in the whole army of people to help you bring it to life.

Tyler Litchenberger: You're not like one spot. You have to deal with the fact that this is going to set the tone and the stage for the vehicle marketing moving forward for our next generation 2020 Highlander. Was it hard to kind of make sure that this did the right thing to do for a whole marketing campaign following it? It's not just one spot.

John Payne: Right? Yeah, that was a big challenge because it's a 60. But it wasn't just a one-off let's entertain, make a point and get out of there. This had to set up the whole Highlander launch that's gonna follow it. So, that added a lot more pressure 'cause it had to set the stage for all the work that's kind of come after it. And that's one of the big reasons that this idea was chosen is because it does fit with the whole campaign so well. It really does set it up in a big way.

Tyler Litchenberger: And did your previous Highlander knowledge help you in that?

John Payne: Yeah, because ... I shouldn't say they haven't changed because they do change. They always change. And you know, every five years that, you know, that generation or that group moves into another life stage, and the one coming in behind it is slightly different.

Tyler Litchenberger: And soon they're in Landcruisers driving around.

John Payne: Right, right. But there are some commonalities. You know what I mean? And yeah, it did help being familiar with the product, with the ... with the ... the needs and the wants of the consumer that's considering it.

Tyler Litchenberger: Now, did you work on the campaign work as well, or is it more of a handoff to a team that worked on just the campaign?

John Payne: No, I'm working on the whole-

Tyler Litchenberger: The whole shebang.

John Payne: The whole shebang, yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's awesome.

John Payne: Yeah. And I think it's important to have someone that that has line of sight over the whole campaign 'cause otherwise, you do run the risk of the spot kind of being a one-off, being a tangent, and then the campaign going in another direction.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: And I did have different teams – one on Super Bowl and another team on launch. So, it was up to me to bridge that gap-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: ... and make sure that they were consistent.

Tyler Litchenberger: Can you tell us about the marketing campaign? Any preview of what people will see after today, February 3rd, 2020. What will people see forward from Highlander, the 2020 Highlander?

John Payne: Yeah, I mean the strategy that we're following is the same strategy that we're following for the campaign. And it's all based on that consumer insight that people who are in the market for Highlander typically, the ringleaders, you know, they're the ones at the center, they're the ones that pull people together. When you're going to meet up at somebody's house, it's usually their house. That's the type of person that we're going after, and celebrating. And the rest of the campaign does the same thing, but we're telling unique stories for each one.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: So, you're going to see a whole variety of communication out there from TV, print, digital, social. And the nice thing is, is you're getting it in all the different markets, whether it'd be a Hispanic market, Asian, Indian market-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: ... African-American, or in the transcultural mainstream-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: ... which is what we're working on. We all work together on this campaign. So, when you look at the whole body of work, it has a consistency to it, and it's all delivering the same message, but it's doing it in a unique way that fits with those different markets.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting. So, when you look at taking something like a 60-second commercial and, now, we know that people in social, as they're scrolling, can really take about a six-second piece of content. How do you cut and how do you take a 60-second story and maybe, you know, that essence of the campaign for Highlander that you mentioned, maybe it's not the exact spot, you know, exactly-

John Payne: Right.

Tyler Litchenberger: ... how do you cut that for six seconds?

John Payne: Well, it's not always possible-

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

John Payne: ...to take something that requires 60 seconds, and then tell that same story in six seconds. We were able to condense this down into 15 seconds

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

John Payne: And you will see that. But usually, when it comes to a six-second piece of content-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: ... it's going to be just a sliver of this story.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: You know what I mean? And a lot of times, we don't have audio either. So, it's just visual. So, there's no dialogue, there's no music.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

John Payne: So, it has to work on a mobile device when someone's got the volume turned all the way down.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah. While there's sitting next to their sleeping significant other and-

John Payne: Right, right, and distracted by probably a laptop that's sitting there to open or a tablet.

Tyler Litchenberger: Guilty.

John Payne: All right.

Tyler Litchenberger: I am guilty. But it might be like the places are the same, right? The snowy adventure area, but it's more about the product, right? The focus becomes less about the story-

John Payne: And more about the product, yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: ... and more about the product, yeah.

John Payne: And we have content that's built specifically for that medium too, for the short format, no audio.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

John Payne: It's all part of the same campaign. It'll have the same message, but we're not trying to tell that big complicated story that we told in 60 seconds in a six-second format.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

Kelsey Soule: That's it for our special look at the ad big game style at Toyota Untold. We can't wait to see what the team comes up with next year. Our show is produced by Alison Powell. And the music you're rocking out to is by Wes Meixner. We're edited and mixed by Crate Media. Thanks again for listening. And if you enjoy our podcast, please give us your feedback. Hit subscribe, give us five stars on Apple Podcast, and email us your comments at podcast@toyota.com.

And again, if you want to talk to Tyler specifically on social media, make sure you tag @Toyota on Twitter and Facebook and @ToyotaUSA on Instagram. Until next time. See you later.