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I write about great brands and their strategies.

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CMO NETWORK 2/04/2015 @ 5:30AM | 715 views

This Is the NFL Brand's Real Problem

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The [NFL](#) brand's real problem can be easily summed up by two ads. During Super Bowl XLIX, the NFL ran two spots. The first depicts a 911 call from a woman pretending to order a pizza while trying to get help from the police because her attacker is nearby. Created by the domestic violence advocacy group [No More](#), it was a chilling, sobering spot that certainly got viewers' attention.

The second ad was actually a series of commercials. It began with teasers showing Don Cheadle, then Brittany Spears, and then a bunch of people getting hyped up about something. The payoff was a spot that showed a montage of football fans celebrating, cheering, dancing, and doing all the crazy things fans do before, during, and after a game. Tagged with the hashtag #SuperBowlRally, it was a celebratory spot that captured the spirit of the Super Bowl.





The contrast between the two spots couldn't have been starker — and it was made clearer by the fact that the No More ad ran in a poor position (right before the half-time show) while the #SuperBowlRally one got an extra boost from the curiosity and anticipation created by the teasers. The juxtaposition of the two ads speaks volumes about the NFL's brand problem.

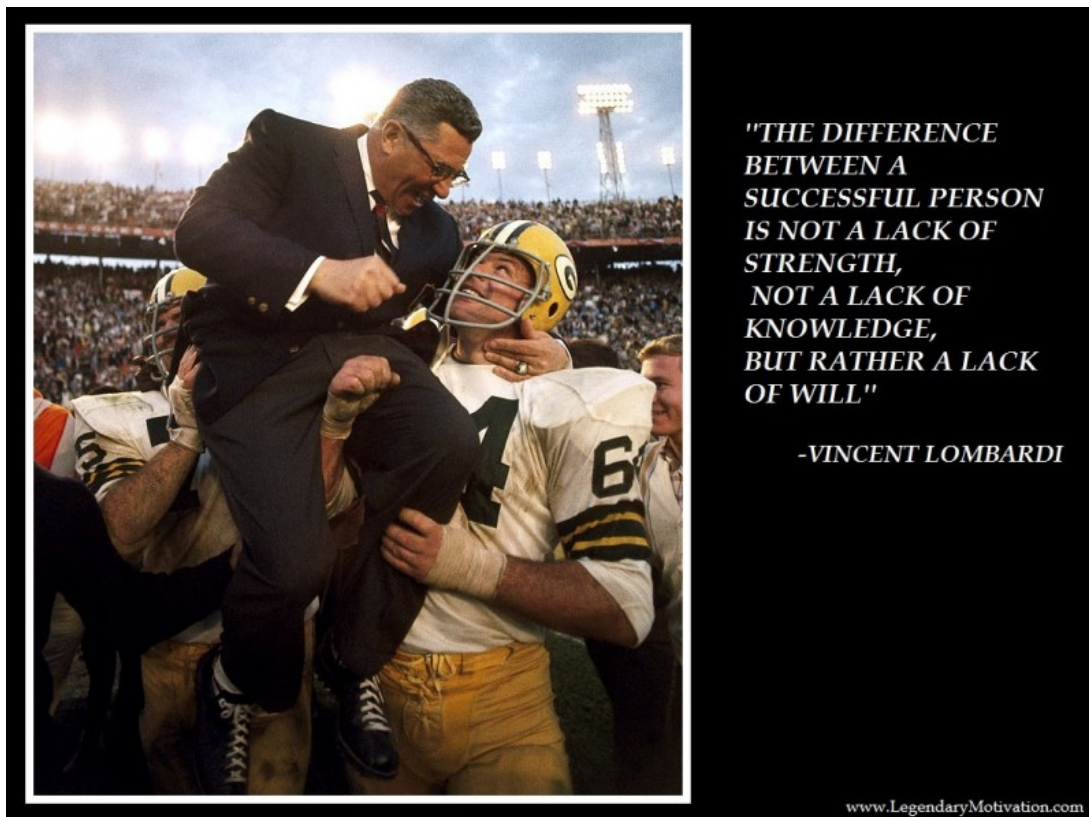
On the one hand, the League wants to stoke the brand passion of its fans and continue to appeal to their competitive spirit. On the other, it needs to address serious problems like the accusations of domestic violence and sexual assault that have been made against Baltimore Ravens' running back [Ray Rice](#), San Francisco's Ray McDonald, and many others.

The NFL's current approach is to try to do both in a way that doesn't allow one to detract from the other — i.e., run two ads that have nothing to do with each other; conduct a press conference to show its taking the accusations seriously while continuing to allow a popular accused player to play; bow its annual breast cancer awareness campaign but ignore national domestic violence awareness which is highlighted in the same month.

Not only does this split personality seem hypocritical (along the lines of fast food brands that promote healthy products in one ad and artery-clogging burgers in the next) — it's also wasteful and ineffective (the number one principle of brand-building is to be singularly focused because few brands can effectively establish multiple identities.)

It doesn't have to be this way. The NFL doesn't have to embrace two opposing brand strategies. Its brand messages don't have to compete for attention. The League could express and adhere to a cohesive, compelling brand idea if only it would do what all great brands do — that is, commit and stay committed to the core of its brand.

The core of the NFL is best embodied by [Vince Lombardi](#), who, perhaps more than any other figure, has endured as the defining leader of the NFL. Lombardi, who coached the Green Bay Packers from 1959-67, is legendary for his coaching philosophy and motivational skills. The one value he held above all others was character. He was taught the importance of character by the Jesuits at Fordham where he studied and played, and he passed along that value to his acolytes. In fact, Lombardi is often quoted on the topic — e.g., “The measure of who we are is what we do with what we have.” When he was asked to design the ring commemorating the Bay Packers’ victory at the very first Super Bowl, he emblazoned it with the words “love” and “character.”



If the NFL were to embrace — or rather, re-embrace — character, and the values so closely associated with it, such as integrity and excellence, it wouldn't have to choose between two priorities that seem to be competing for its attention. Character would inform the way it inspires fans and the way it addresses serious issues such as domestic violence. Partying fans and issue advocates alike will root for the good guys. They want heroes to celebrate and to hold up as role models. They want to back people of character.

What does would it look like for the League to commit and stay committed to character? With its awards, it would promote the character of its players, for example celebrating those who participated in the No More campaign by recording video clips for its “Speechless” series as much as it heralded those who made winning plays during a game. In its advertising, it would use

celebrities who are known for having admirable character. In its promotions, it would reward fans who display character as much as passion. Character is an emotional characteristic that is universally appealing and timeless — the NFL couldn't ask for a more appropriate platform.

The NFL brand is powerful and valuable but it won't sustain its status if it continues to battle itself. It needs to renew its commitment to character and make it the central, unifying value for everything it does. As Lombardi once said, "Watch your habits, they become your character."

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