



# Insight & Strategy: Biggest Ad Ever /

## LIQUID DEATH

How a beverage company subverted the Super Bowl by auctioning off ad space on its packaging

17 APR 2024

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAvhBrvOt5Y>

In the week leading up to the Super Bowl in 2024, punk rock beverage brand **Liquid Death** subverted the \$7m price tag for a 30-second big game spot by offering brands the option to buy media space on the side of 500,000 cases of its product instead.

Liquid Death auctioned off the media space through an eBay page, which ended on 13 February. Liquid Death later revealed cryptocurrency platform Coinbase had pledged the highest bid of \$500,114.

**Results /** According to the brand, Liquid Death received **200** legitimate bids on eBay, with many brands posts on social media about their bids. The campaign resulted in **26 million** press impressions. Coinbase's winning bid was the **10th** most expensive item to ever have been sold on eBay.

To find out more about Liquid Death's self-proclaimed **Biggest Ad Ever** and catch up with the brand after its recent \$1.4bn valuation, Contagious spoke to Liquid Death VP of marketing **Gregory Fass**, and VP of creative **Andy Pearson**. They said that:

- The Super Bowl presents both an awareness and sales opportunity for Liquid Death, due to the event being one of the last truly shared cultural experiences in the US, and it also aligning with Liquid Death's 'party water' USP
- The initial idea was to sell the on-pack media placement through Liquid Death's merchandising store, but was changed to eBay to sustain media interest with the increasing bids
- Liquid Death likes to make small bets within its marketing efforts, ie consistently trying new things and not placing all of its resources into one idea.
- Working in-house means the brand can produce work quickly and relatively cheaply, resulting in huge returns in earned media

### What are Liquid Death's key challenges?

**Gregory Fass:** A lot of people still to this day talk about Liquid Death as a water company, even though we've branched out to be a multi-category brand and more of a healthy beverage platform. For us, we want to continue bringing our unique marketing approach – which aligns more with unhealthy junk food, beer or energy drinks advertising – to healthy beverages like flavoured water or iced tea.

Like any brand that's grown the way that we have, it's keeping that disruptive, creative and outsider's perspective on everything, despite the success that comes with being a more established brand. The challenge for us will then continue to be, 'How do we focus on truly entertaining people and not lose the core humour behind the brand?'



**Every time we put something out that breaks the mould, it touches someone new who hadn't heard of Liquid Death before. At that moment, it shows them exactly what type of brand we are**

Gregory Fass, Liquid Death

**Is the Super Bowl an important consumption occasion for Liquid Death, or is it more about it being a cultural opportunity to spread awareness of the brand?**

**Fass:** It's both. We see the Super Bowl as one of the last true shared entertainment experiences in the US; it's an opportunity to flex our creativity and tap into a moment where there's already a big built-in audience. But it's also an important consumption moment, Liquid Death is trying to take something healthy and sustainable and make it 50 times more fun. We have infinitely recyclable tall boy cans that look like beer, so any occasion where someone is drinking alcohol becomes an occasion for Liquid Death – whether that's a Super Bowl party, birthday party, concert or festival. Everybody drinks water and there's always water at parties – but Liquid Death helps people who aren't drinking fit in and doesn't evoke questions of 'Why are you not drinking?'

**In the Liquid Death product life cycle, have you moved from niche cult following to a more mainstream brand?**

**Fass:** We're not trying to broaden ourselves to a mainstream audience, we're trying to evolve how we reach people with new and different ideas that match the scale of where we're at now. Every time we put something out that breaks the mould like with The Biggest Ad Ever, it touches someone new who hadn't heard of Liquid Death before. At that moment, it shows them exactly what type of brand we are.



**Did you receive a brief for this campaign?**

**Fass:** There wasn't a brief for this one...

**Andy Pearson:** ... there rarely is.

**Fair enough, what about a key insight behind the idea?**

**Fass:** We usually start with some sort of insight or the kernel of an idea in [founder and CEO] Mike Cessario's brain. I believe the idea was sparked by Cessario being in sales meetings and seeing how many people are walking through the doors of our biggest retailers. Then when you see the viewership and press numbers from the Super Bowl, quoted as a hundred million viewers, there are about two times as many people that walk into our retailers and see our product on the shelf every single week. Why not put our Super Bowl ad on the box itself?

**It's not about our feelings, this is supposed to be transactional. We're not selling a partnership or some brand collaboration here**

**Once you had the insight and general creative idea, how did you then go about bringing it to life for the Super Bowl?**

**Pearson:** We went through rounds of edits of bringing it to Fass and the wider team to ask, 'Does this make sense?' or 'How do we feel about this?' We were struggling a little bit because originally we were just going to sell it in our online store for \$2m, just like you'd buy a piece of merch. Then, when we were three weeks out and giving it a last attempt, we asked, 'What if we make it an eBay auction instead?' That felt way better because you can just start the bid low and it can go up to a price with a natural valuation.

**Fass:** Also, if we just sold it in our merch store, one person would buy it and would become just one blip of a moment. But we had this hypothesis that brands, agencies and people would want to get involved, so this auction would be a way to open the doors for many people to get in on the action. Anyone could then be the highest bidder over the week the auction was live – that's what helps to raise the excitement.

**Pearson:** People could also Photoshop their stuff onto our box, which is what Progressive Insurance did. Everything was considered to make sure that we made the most interesting, compelling and fun thing we could. Then even if it sells for a couple of thousand dollars and someone small buys it, it's still going to be a funny thing with 'Randy's RVs' on the side of the box. It took us a while to get to that little unlock, then three more weeks to go through finance, get eBay set up and shoot the actual video.



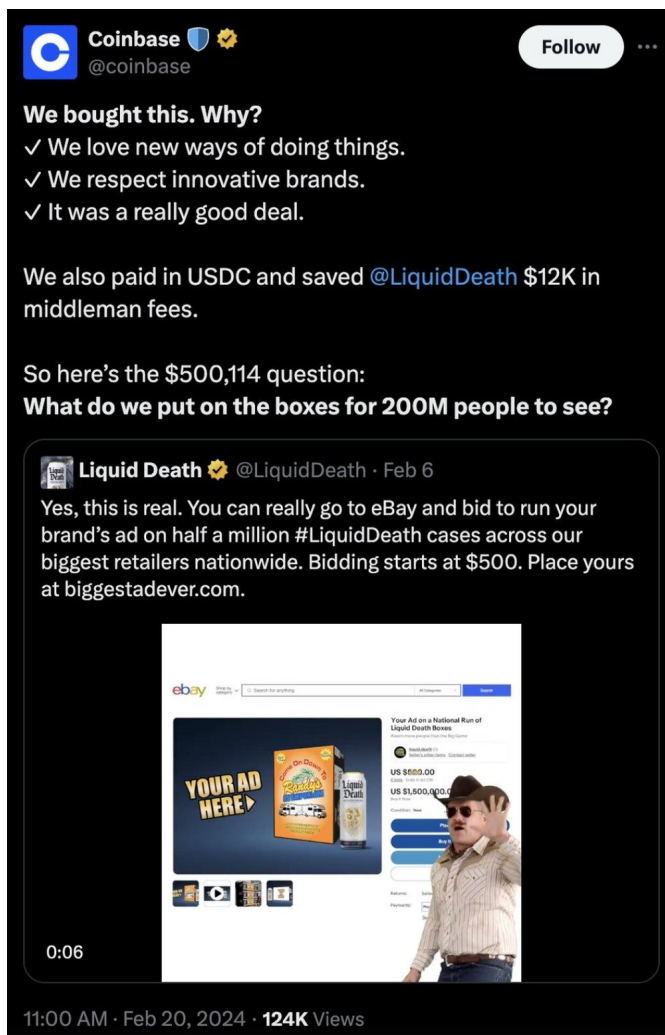
**There was a bit of drama in the last few moments of the eBay auction, can you tell us a bit more about what exactly happened?**

**Fass:** With any online auction, a lot of the action happens within the last couple of minutes. A lot of brands had set up their accounts and were planning on bidding, some of these brands had even contacted us telling us they wanted to get involved. It's very hard to set up an eBay account as a brand that you can then actually bid from, and these brands were showing us screenshots in the last few minutes that their bids were being blocked and shut down by eBay.

**Pearson:** We definitely pushed the limits of the eBay platform design.

**Fass:** Going into this, the whole idea was to give this ad space to the highest bidder. We felt that to stay true to that promise, we wanted to let in the people who were having just technical issues to still bid.

**Pearson:** It would have been a nicer cleaner finish, but at the end of the day that wouldn't have been in the spirit of what we were trying to do.



**The ultimate winner of the auction was the cryptocurrency brand Coinbase for \$500,114. Were you happy with this result?**

**Pearson:** Honestly, we don't care. We've met them and exchanged emails, they're very nice people. But from our perspective, it doesn't matter who won because it's just like purchasing a billboard. This billboard just so happens to be on the side of a Liquid Death box.

**Fass:** It's not about our feelings, this is supposed to be transactional. We're not selling a partnership or some brand collaboration here.

**Pearson:** We are very choosy about who we work with, so that does make this idea a little dangerous because anyone could purchase it.

**Fass:** That's what made the idea so fun and interesting. Any brand can collaborate with another by co-packaging design – you see that in grocery stores all the time when a new film partners with a potato chip company and you have all the characters on the bag. But it was new for us to sell this through a public forum like eBay as if it was a media space and compete with what the industry knows as the biggest ad ever – the Super Bowl. We wanted to just flip that on its head.

**[For us] success is the efficiency of the marketing dollars we're spending to drive impressions and earned media that far outweigh the number of dollars that we put in**

Gregory Fass, Liquid Death

**We couldn't help but notice the 16 points of T&Cs about what advertisers could not do with the media placement. Can you tell us more about the decision to put these safeguards in place and not take a more 'punk rock' anything-goes attitude to who or what becomes advertised?**

**Fass:** Every time you buy media, it needs to follow strict advertising rules. And I guarantee ours were much more lenient than any of the other mainstream media that brands typically buy. If you've ever advertised at the Super Bowl, you know how strict the process is for that creative.

We were saying with this media buy that it's nearly two times bigger than what we all know to be the biggest advertising opportunity in the US, and the reason for that is the reach this had was access to every grocery store across the country. The creative had to be appropriate for all those audiences and advertising standards to ensure the cases stayed on the shelves throughout the whole media buy. But within those guidelines and making sure it was marked as an ad and not a collaboration, you could put whatever you wanted to put on that box.



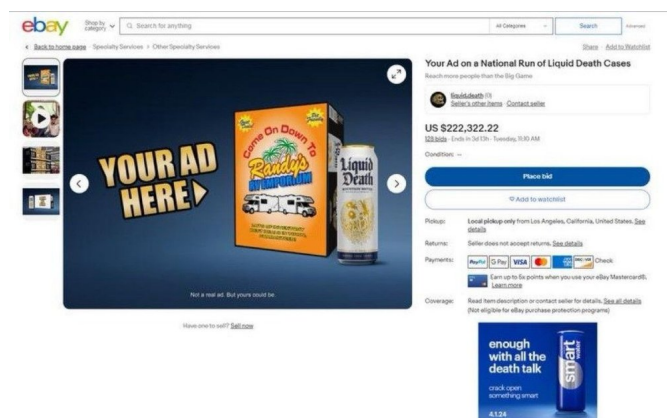
### What KPIs were you using to measure the effectiveness of this campaign and how successful was it for Liquid Death?

**Fass:** For most things we do, our KPIs are 'Did this make someone laugh?' and 'Did we make fun of traditional advertising in a subversive way?' We hit on both those things, and then success is the efficiency of the marketing dollars we're spending to drive impressions and earned media that far outweigh the number of dollars that we put in. In this case, \$5,000 went into the video cost, and then over a \$1m in earned media value came out. Plus we cracked the top 10 most expensive things ever sold on eBay.

**Pearson:** The other important thing is that there's still going to be more stops for earned media in the future. There was even one recently when Coinbase announced what it was going to be putting on the cases. But fast forward three to five months when these things are on shelves, suddenly there's another conversation when someone sees it, pulls it down or buys it. Maybe they didn't see the campaign, but then they look it up and discover there's another big part to the story. I hear once a week from someone who's never heard of the brand before and then gets sucked down a rabbit hole for like three hours looking into all our stuff.

### Was this idea designed to be divisive in any way and encourage discourse online?

**Fass:** There wasn't any negative sentiment on this one, it was all mainly positive. We believe that most people hate corporate marketing as much as we do, so the position that we took was of making fun of corporate marketing and the traditional advertising industry as a whole – that as an idea doesn't have a lot of strong vocal objections in comment sections online. Probably the most negative thing was that a marketing exec at Smart Water posted on LinkedIn that the brand had bought ad placement on our eBay listing.

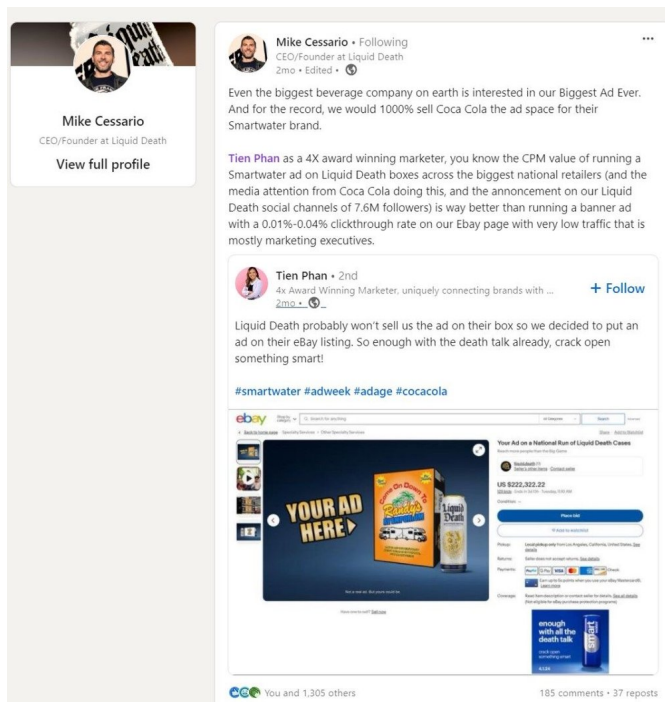


### What was your reaction to Smart Water's attempt to hijack the campaign?

**Pearson:** We were like: kudos to you if you want to run some poorly written, poorly executed and obliquely anti-Liquid Death ads on our eBay listing page to reach a couple of hundred people who are already here to Like us. Mike Cessario even responded to it on LinkedIn. But when we pressed the button to launch this campaign, I don't think any of us had on our bingo card that Smart Water was going to buy banner ads on there.

**Fass:** We had to be prepared for if a competitor won the media buy, but we never thought that a competitor would simply add fuel to our fire on social. We kind of got the best of both worlds there.





**Do you admire Smart Water for trying to get involved in your campaign and doing something different?**

**Pearson:** For a huge giant in the beverage industry to come down to our lowly eBay listing page and take the time to buy ads, it just makes you look smaller when you do that kind of thing. Yes, we have to give them some credit, but it's a weird move and we certainly wouldn't do it. We don't pay too much attention to what other beverage brands are doing. Obviously from a business standpoint, we look at that stuff. But like from a marketing standpoint, who freakin' cares?

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lEvHHH3jL4>

**Back in 2022, Liquid Death ran its first Super Bowl ad that aired during the main broadcast. How did the Kids Hydrating at a Party ad come about and how effective was it?**

**Fass:** We needed that spot to be super memorable as the Super Bowl is a really big stage and ripe territory for us. We did a regional media buy with that spot, so we were very efficient with our media dollars. Then outside of the spot itself, we got nearly 5x our paid impressions with earned media through people engaging and sharing on social media. Despite it being super educational and doing a great job of saying to people 'Don't be scared, it's just water,' it got the right people to hate it online to hit the perfect balance of 50% positive sentiment. That is what helped the commercial to spread far beyond the Super Bowl itself and there are still conversations around it online today.

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cYJbhCVisE>

**The same year, you also tried to rig the Super Bowl by hiring a witch to help the Cincinnati Bengals win. How did that go?**

**Pearson:** I blame the Bengals for not winning because if they'd won, we would have got way more press and we would have been featured on ESPN as 'Liquid Death hired a witch to throw the Super Bowl.'

**Fass:** Even the witch told us that black magic doesn't work every time.

**Pearson:** 60% probability according to them.

**Fass:** Even though it didn't become this huge ESPN front-page story after the fact, it did drive a ton of earned media and was a successful piece of social content for us. The Witch Bet and the kids drinking at the party are both super core comedic ideas for Liquid Death – there was also a third idea of a hidden QR code at the end of the ad where someone got a whole pallet of Liquid Death for \$1.

**Mike Cessario has instilled a culture of making great ideas happen. When you have the top decision maker at a company that's also a creative, it allows you to do way more because they understand the value of an idea and not just push it aside**

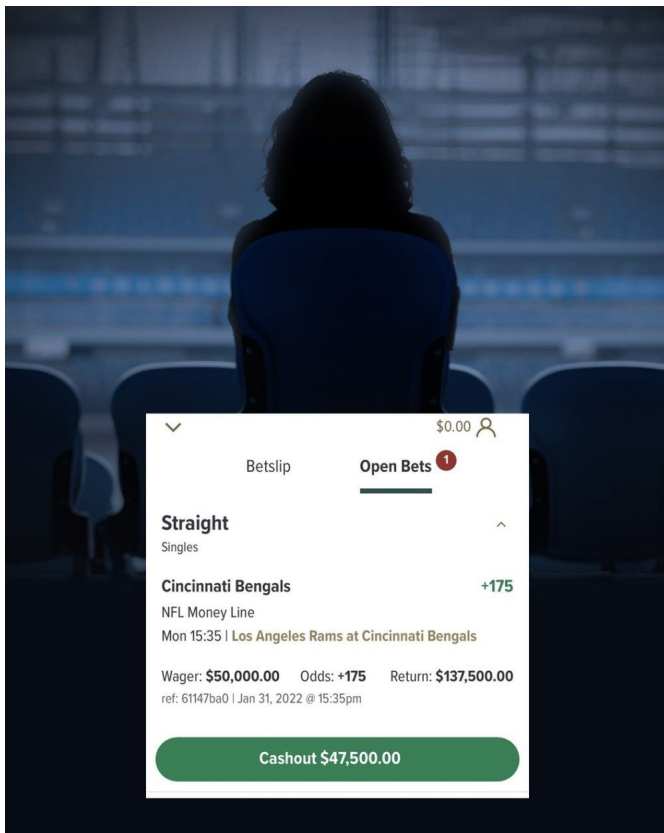
## Most brands put all their effort into one big idea at the Super Bowl, why did Liquid Death execute those various ideas in 2022?

**Fass:** Going into that year, we wanted to do all of them because we wanted to show up everywhere for that particular Super Bowl and poke fun at the traditional media and advertising world. This year, [AdWeek](#) published an article with campaigns that redefined Super Bowl advertising, and our ad is on there among these insane heavy hitters that are in the lore of advertising.

**Pearson:** If you look at that Adweek list, we spent the least money on the production of anybody. It's all agencies, who then went out and hired their own production companies, directors etc... all these fees stack up. Even for the [Coinbase QR Code](#) spot, when you stack all the agency fees, we guarantee we paid less than any single brand on this list. For us, all these Super Bowl campaigns are small bets. Obviously, buying a Super Bowl spot is not a small bet. But the way we did it was the smallest bet that you can make on a very big bet.

**Pearson:** For the witch campaign, we put \$50k down plus a small production fee, and the QR code cost us a pallet of water. The thing is, you don't know what or where something is going to hit, we like to try and keep things small because then there's not all this pressure on this one thing to actually like hit big.

We are built in a way that our finance team and executive team want to enable great creative marketing right and great ideas like this to come to fruition. For a brand to create an account at Caesar's Sportsbook and place \$50,000 into it would have been killed at many stages of the process somewhere else, or to give the freedom for a brand to advertise on your case and auction it off to the highest bidder – there are so many reasons legal and financial reasons to not do that. But we like to break the rules.



## How is your in-house agency system going? What advantages does this give you over working with an external agency?

**Pearson:** It's why we can do what we can do at the speed and fluidity that we can work at. We currently work with our own internal production company called Death Machine, so because we can also own every step of the process and know the brand so intimately, we arrive at the right answer very quickly. We generally think of it as writing for a TV character in a lot of ways, where we know the character so well that we can ask ourselves, 'What would Liquid Death do?'

**Fass:** Also, so many of our ideas are not even commercials and they require other business functions within the company to make happen. The Biggest Ad Ever required working with our distribution, production and ops teams... all these different teams that an external agency would have to have separate conversations with and probably arrive at someone who said 'no'. All these places where the idea would have died. But since we are a part of this company, we can come out of a meeting and grab a meeting with these teams right away and get to the bottom of it.

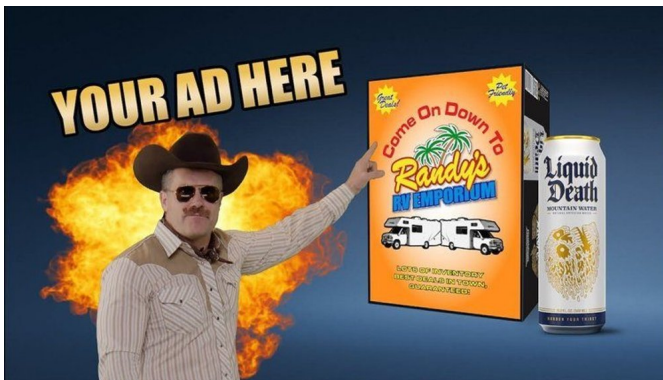
## Everybody here at Liquid Death shares the mentality of 'What can we make today that no one's ever seen before?' With that attitude it's not about risk, it's just entrepreneurship

Andy Pearson, Liquid Death

**It sounds like at Liquid Death you're always fighting to make sure that good ideas get made, regardless of how hard the prospect is. Does that sound right?**

**Pearson:** We're not even fighting, everyone is like 'That's fucking funny, let's do that.' The only thing we're fighting is 'how do we pull this off'. How do we put this on eBay? How do we make an enema kit? That's the only fighting and it's just a little bit more hard than what a marketing department is asked to do. Everybody here at Liquid Death shares the mentality of 'What can we make today that no one's ever seen before?' With that attitude it's not about risk, it's just about entrepreneurship.

**Fass:** Mike Cessario has instilled a culture of making great ideas happen. When you have the top decision maker at a company that's also a creative, it allows you to do way more because they understand the value of an idea and not just push it aside. Other leaders may be like 'It's just a marketing idea, it's not worth the operations or sales team's time. They have bigger things to be doing.' But it allows us to get the whole company to focus on disrupting the industry.'



**What has been your single greatest learning from this campaign?**

**Fass:** One of our biggest learnings is if you give people, brands and marketers the opportunity to have some fun outside of what their strict guidelines are – they're going to want to play. Everyone wants to have more fun with what they're doing, but often they can't because they're handcuffed by brand guidelines or leadership that tells them no. But when we posted this, to see all the brands, big and small, getting involved with this, having fun, and going outside of what they would typically do to play in our sandbox – it shows that there's a lot more appetite for this kind of work in the industry and potential for Liquid Death to do even more unexpected things in our future work with other brands.

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