

Blackout has ad buyers thinking Lions may be risky bet

BY BILL SHEA

CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Despite a winless record going into Sunday's game at Chicago, the Detroit Lions are holding steady in television ratings, but last weekend's blackout has some advertising buyers jittery.

"I haven't been trying to buy (Lions games) much for people. They're just not interested," said Andy Winnie, owner of Plymouth-based eBuy Media Inc.

Because the Lions failed to sell out 64,500-seat Ford Field 72 hours before the Oct. 26 game against the Washington Redskins, NFL rules mandated the game not be shown within 75 miles of the stadium.

That's not what advertisers were looking for when buying air time on NFL Sundays, meaning Fox had to offer time during another game or during different programming.

WJBK Vice President and General Manager Jeff Murri declined to comment.

A 30-second local commercial during a Lions game on WJBK costs between \$5,000 and \$7,000, local media buys say, and there are seven to eight minutes of local commercial time available during a typical three-hour broadcast.

The same 30-second spot on a Sunday afternoon during non-NFL programming costs about \$300.

Lions games have averaged an 18 rating this season, according to New York-based audience-tracking service Nielsen Media Research. Each ratings point represents 19,270 households in the Detroit market, and ad rates are based on audience numbers.

The leaguewide average is a 9.9 for all Sunday afternoon games.

WJBK's non-NFL programming during the blackout drew an aver-

age 0.9 rating.

Winnie had a premonition that game would be blacked out and chose to buy pregame ads for West Bloomfield-based Cauley Chevrolet on CBS affiliate WWJ-Ch. 62, which also airs NFL games.

"I took a gamble knowing the game wasn't going to be on," he said. "I bought some last-minute inventory."

The threat of a blackout can drive advertisers' decisions for the rest of the season, said Mike Dietz, president and director of Dietz Trott Sports & Entertainment in Farmington Hills, which helps companies



Dietz

said. "You have to move your advertising message somewhere, or you don't buy in advance. It hurts the advertisers if they have time-sensitive messages, like a product on sale next week or a grand opening."

with sponsorships.

"The advertisers are targeting the local NFL broadcast for specific reasons — to reach a certain audience, a certain demographic," he

The announced attendance for the blacked-out game was 54,312, although the stadium reportedly appeared far emptier — not surprising for a team that's lost 14 of its past 15 games and hasn't had a winning season since 2000.

The Lions, who raised ticket prices an average of 18 percent before the season, have offered a variety of ticket packages and can likely rely on a sellout for the traditional Thanksgiving Day game, but no new ticket incentives have been announced by the team since the blackout.

The team declined to comment.

Furniture store Gardner-White bought the remaining 5,000 tickets to ensure a sellout for the Sept. 14 home opener against the Packers, but no one stepped up for the Oct. 26 game. Corporate bulk purchases to avoid blackouts aren't uncommon.

The last Lions game to be blacked out was Dec. 30, 2001, against the Bears at the Pontiac Silverdome (a 24-0 loss). The team has sold out every game since moving to Ford Field the following season, a streak of 51 games.

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