

Food Publicity Stunts: Viral Marketing in the Culinary Arts



Viral marketing campaigns catalyzed by food publicity stunts are prevalent throughout the culinary arts and the restaurant industry. The strategy is seen across the spectrum from the higher echelons of exclusive fine dining to the more accessible realm of fast food empires. Stunt marketing captures user interest through absurdity - be this in the context of bizarre foods or bizarre promotion surrounding the food. This paper considers its strengths and weaknesses through theory and specific case studies.

Key Terms

This paper draws on the use of the seven key terms: risk-taking, audience, social media, conflict, boundaries, environment, and dissonance (defined in endnotes). These terms, used without, give shape to the practice of viral marketing and are used to highlight its significant components, strengths, and challenges.

The Viral Marketing Strategy

Viral marketing operates on the mechanism of using an **audience** base to spread information. In contemporary marketing, virality implies the use **social media** networks. The word is indicative of rapid spreading through its allusion to a virus. Put plainly, if a campaign is said to have gone viral, it has simply become a sensation of the moment, shared frequently across **social media**. This is an attractive strategy as it cuts costs in ad distribution.

The consumers themselves are the ones spreading the ad and in some sense, this is related word-of-mouth marketing. However, there is one major distinction (Viral marketing, 2012). Word-of-mouth marketing generally involves the dissemination of information between people who already know each other. For example, telling a friend about a business with which you had a good experience. Viral marketing involves the sharing of information across broad networks involving thousands, sometimes millions, of people who have never interacted with each other before.

Sometimes viral marketing is intentionally engineered. Marketing designers and developers can, with a good eye for the current cultural **environment**, craft an ad with every intent of making it go viral. Engineered campaigns often target current trends. For example, advertisements of late may be geared toward inclusivity and the dismantling of stereotypes. While making a statement, there is also the understanding that these are the types of campaigns that are likely to be shared on **social media** as consumers reinforce their own beliefs and identities, wishing to make the same statement. Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty* works to deconstruct our notions of what makes a woman beautiful. Other campaigns may attract attention through pure shock-value such as Red Bull's visibility with *Stratos*, in which Felix Baumgartner dove through the stratosphere from space (Guerrero, 2015). Ads like these build off our desire to impress friends and share the seemingly unbelievable.

“For any creative thought to be contagious, it must first be worthy of a sneeze.”

- Ryan Lilly, Business Incubation Professional



Fig. 1: The Bagel Shop's rainbow bagels (top left), Taco Bell's Naked Chicken Chalupa (top right), Ferran Adria's bubbles (bottom left), KFC's fried chicken sunscreen (bottom right)

Viral, Stunt, and Novelty Food Marketing

Viral marketing is used frequently with intention in the culinary arts and restaurant industry. Restaurateurs large and small use the technique to draw attention to their cuisine. From mom-and-pop eateries with ten pound burgers to innovating and attention grabbing elevated fine dining dishes resembling science experiments to big-brand publicity stunts, the tactic is seen in many iterations throughout the field. Here I will consider three foundational techniques repeated often to great success: novelty, innovation, and **dissonance** in campaigns.

Novelty

Novelty foods are used to attract attention to a company. These typically occur in two format: the weird and the beautiful. Some companies will create absurd and bizarre flavor combinations to draw media attention, like Taco Bell's Naked Chicken Chalupa in which a shaped piece of fried chicken acts as a shell (Fig 1). We see this very often in the fast food industry with global players vying for media attention. McDonald's has Pumpkin Spice Fries in Japan (Kim, 2016) and Nutella burgers in Italy (Huock, 2016a), Burger King has a Whopper with donut buns (Huock, 2016b), and Pizza Hut has a pizza with tater tot crust (Eater Staff, 2016). These are often referred to as stunt foods and serve the primary purpose of generating conversation. This is similar to the

phenomenon of state fair food as well. When companies keep their staple menus but release and promote the absurd they generate free marketing of the brand. It also attracts the breed of eaters that wish to try (and document their experience of) the unusual, generating more conversation.

Others use beauty to make photo-worthy foods designed for Instagram fame, such as Brooklyn's The Bagel Shop's rainbow bagels that have garnered lines around the corner and spin-offs around the globe (Fig. 1). As **social media** and destination dining (the act of traveling specifically for a chef or restaurant) explode parallel to each other, chefs are taking advantage of the trend with photo-worthy dishes. These typically are seen in higher-end restaurants pioneered by famous chefs, or in trendy smaller shops trying to gain more attention in the food media. Customers, in sharing photos, attract others to the restaurant in what becomes a trend of challenge of food-spotting. Other examples include Black Tap Burger's over-the-top architectural milkshakes (Eater Video, 2016), the oft-copied cronut at Dominique Ansel (DeJesus, 2014), and 10Below's rolled ice cream (Lynch, 2015). These tactics work in a similar way of attracting personal and media attention but through the lens of aesthetic hipsterism. These cases all see lines out the door for customers clamoring for a photo.

Innovation

Innovation works similarly as a tactic by attracting foodies, restaurant hunters, and the Instagram-obsessed. New types of fine dining innovations and the **social media** posts related to them allow a class of people to make a statement about who they are. Showing off a famous chef's novel creation is a way to tell the world you're wealthy, you're cool, you've been somewhere exclusive and tried something not many people have. A classic example of this is the work coming out of Ferran Adria's lab. Adria spends half of the year working in his world renowned restaurant El Bulli, and the other half in a food-oriented research lab where he challenges our notion of what is food, pushing **boundaries** to promote his work. He explores different textures, mediums, and flavors creating combinations and constructs that have not yet existed (Borden, 2015). The innovation drives people from all over the world to attend his hours-long set menu at exorbitant prices. This creates the same type of phenomenon as Pokémon Go - a competition between friends and strangers in a game of culinary one-upmanship.

Dissonance

Humorous or odd campaigns can also use the unexpected to attract attention in the industry. Kentucky Fried Chicken seems to be adept in this realm. They have run campaigns from fried chicken-scented sunscreen ([link](#)) (Fig. 1) to buckets of chicken that double as bluetooth printers or USB chargers.



“They’re actually talking about KFC, and you can market to love and hate; you cannot market to indifference.”

- Greg Creed, CEO Yum! Brands

These campaigns are intended to gain attention and often, this is meant to be through unsavory ways. KFC uses the model that any publicity is good publicity and understands that, if people hate the ad, if it makes them feel uncomfortable they will likely talk about it. If they are talking about it, regardless to the opinion or context, the KFC brand is being spread. At a Yum! Brands (parent company of KFC) conference, CEO Greg Creed noted in response to an ad that, "So far the response has been about 80% positive, 20% hate it, and I am actually quite happy that 20% hate it, because now they at least have an opinion. They’re actually talking about KFC, and you can market to love and hate; you cannot market to indifference." Sometimes the intent is not to create or maintain an image but to simply spread the brand name (Taylor, 2016). This sort of **risk-taking** can often work in favor of a company. It attracts attention by creating a **dissonance** between what we expect and what we receive. When things are out of place or absurd, it becomes difficult to ignore.

Impact of Viral Marketing

Viral marketing, when executed successfully, can have great benefits. The nature of the strategy guarantees widespread visibility across social networks spanning the globe. Because much of the work is done by the consumer, costs are significantly cheaper as well. The company has to do much less to disseminate their campaign as the viewers naturally do it for them. While visibility spreads knowledge of the brand, it also helps foster credibility. When something is more well known or when it is learned of through friends, consumers are more likely to place trust in the company (Sukhraj, 2016).

Viral marketing can, however, be very difficult to execute. It requires a keen eye for trends of the moment and often requires much luck as vitality can happen purely by accident. There is also a risk of generating negative association. A viral campaign is not always well known for positive imagery and can occur due to **conflict**. Companies

often go viral after being called out on failing to practice inclusivity. In other cases, too much exposure can be a challenge. If a small company accidentally creates a viral dish, they often have a hard time managing the new wave of customers flocking to their tables.

Endnotes

Risk-taking: This is pretty self-explanatory. In this type of campaign one musn't be opposed to approaching the absurd and straying from paths of conventional advertising.

Audience: The populace who sees the campaign. This expands beyond a targeted audience and includes everyone the campaign reaches.

Social Media: Web-based platforms that facilitate the sharing of ideas. This is a tool for virality in this context, as much of the success of a publicity stunt is relative to social media sharing.

Conflict: A potential downfall in using the absurd is going to far. Conflict arises socially and for the brand if the campaign becomes insensitive.

Boundaries: Pushing boundaries - both socially and in terms of what is considered marketing - is a viable way to attract attention and increase talk about the brand

Environment: The sociocultural environment in which the campaign is designed to run

Dissonance: A sense of discordance, having marketing not quite line up with audience expectations to capture attention and create a sense that something is off

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