

# COMPANY Case

## Burger King: Promoting a Food Fight

### CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

In early 2004, as Burger King's CEO Brad Blum reviewed the company's 2003 outcomes, he decided once again that he had to do something to spice up BK's bland performance. Industry leader McDonald's had just reported a 9 percent sales jump in 2003 to a total of \$22.1 billion while number-two BK's U.S. sales had slipped about 5 percent to \$7.9 billion. Further, number-three Wendy's sales had spiked 11 percent to \$7.4 billion, putting it in a position to overtake BK.

Blum surprised the fast-food industry by abruptly firing the firm's advertising agency, Young & Rubicam (Y&R), and awarding its global creative account to a small, Miami-based, upstart firm Crispin, Porter + Bogusky (Crispin). The switch marked the fifth time in four years that BK had moved its account! Ad agency Y&R had gotten the \$350 million BK account only 10 months earlier. To help revive BK's sales, it had developed a campaign with the theme "The Fire's Ready," which focused on BK's flame-broiled cooking method versus frying. However, observers found the message to be flat and uninspiring, and the declining sales sealed Y&R's fate.

With the move to Crispin, there was no shortage of speculation that the fickle Burger King would soon move again. Many saw BK as a bad client, impossible to work for. Others predicted that the "win" of this account would ruin Crispin's quirky culture. But in announcing the Crispin selection, Blum indicated he had challenged the firm to develop "ground-breaking, next-level, results-oriented, and innovative advertising that strongly connects with our core customers." BK automatically became the small firm's largest client, but Crispin was not without an impressive track record. The creative shop was known for its offbeat, unorthodox, and even irreverent promotions. Because its clients often had little money for advertising, Crispin found inexpensive ways to gain attention, veering away from the traditional mass media.

Crispin had produced award-winning, low-budget campaigns for BMW's MINI Cooper, IKEA furniture, Sunglass Hut, and Virgin Atlantic Airways, forging a reputation as an out-of-the-box, results-oriented agency. Along the way, Crispin developed some loose "rules." Among them were the following:

- zero in on the product
- kick the TV commercial habit
- find the sweet spot (the overlap between product characteristics and customer needs)
- surprise = buzz = exposure
- don't be timid
- think of advertising as a product rather than a service

### HIT AFTER HIT FOR THE KING

It was these rules that guided Crispin's work for BK. Within a month of getting the burger giant's account, Crispin recommended going back to the firm's "Have It Your Way" tagline, developed by BK's second advertising agency, BBDO, way back in 1974. Crispin argued that it could take that old phrase and make it relevant to today's customers. Although Crispin's pitch may have initially seemed "same-old," it was anything but. Uncharacteristic of its past campaigns, Crispin kicked off the new BK campaign with TV commercials. In a series of offbeat ads that were a takeoff on the comedy series *The Office*, office workers competed and compared their "made my way" BK burgers, reinforcing the message that each customer could have a custom-made burger—no matter how unusual it might be. Crispin planned an entire package of promotions around the new-old theme, including everything from in-store signage to messages on cups.

Although *The Office* ads were unusual and catchy, they were also mainstream media. However, the TV campaign created an environment for the real Crispin approach to emerge. To promote BK's TenderCrisp chicken, Crispin launched a microsite, [www.subservientchicken.com](http://www.subservientchicken.com). Among other things, the site featured a man dressed in a chicken suit who would respond by performing any commands that visitors typed in to a text box. The only indication that the site was sponsored by Burger King

was a small icon marked, "BK Tendercrisp." When Crispin launched the site, it told only 20 people—all of whom were friends of people who worked at the agency. Within the first 10 days, 20 million people visited the site, with the average visitor spending more than seven minutes.

As a follow-up to the Subservient Chicken promotion, Crispin created a campaign to launch a new BK product, chicken fries. The promotion was based on a faux heavy metal band called Coq Roq (the lead singer's name was Fowl Mouth). The whole idea was to create the charade of a real band, complete with songs, videos, cell phone ring tones, and promotional merchandise. Crispin targeted this campaign squarely at what it perceived to be the main BK target market—young men. Whatever those young men thought of Coq Roq, it led them to buy more than 100 million orders of chicken fries in the first four weeks of the new product launch.

Crispin clearly demonstrated with both the Subservient Chicken and Coq Roq campaigns that it was a master at viral marketing—using unusual methods to get attention and to generate buzz and word of mouth. Despite the success of these campaigns in producing lots of Web site hits, many analysts wondered if they would turn around BK's sliding market share. There was also speculation as to whether or not Crispin could continue to produce ideas that would keep BK strong in the fast-food fights.

## A VIRAL TURNAROUND

Largely because of years of poor performance, tension had been mounting between Burger King's franchisees and the corporation. Initially, the new direction of its ad campaigns didn't help. Franchisees hated the viral Web campaigns, as they did an earlier Crispin campaign featuring an eerie bobblehead-looking King with a gargantuan ceramic head.

But at Burger King's 2006 annual franchisee convention, the feeling in the air was "long live the king." CEO Blum debuted a new Crispin ad entitled, "Manthem." A parody of performer Helen Reddy's song, "I Am Woman," the spot was yet another example of BK's strategy to unapologetically embrace the young, male, fast-food "super fan." "Manthem's" lyrics spurned "chick food" and gleefully exalted the meat, cheese, and more meat and cheese combos that turn "innies into outies," all the while showing guys burning their briefs and pushing a minivan off a bridge.

After openly revolting at the convention the year before, BK's restaurant operators rose to their feet in a thunderous ovation, demanding an encore. They now embraced the kind of uncomfortably edgy advertising that they had rejected not so long before. Why this sudden change of heart?

Perhaps it was because Burger King was on the verge of a public offering. Or maybe it was because sales and profits go a long way in healing wounds. "I feel much better this year than I have in the last three, four, or five years," said Mahendra Nath, owner/operator of 90 stores. With sales up multiple years in a row, another franchisee, Alex Salgueiro, said, "I think our competitors are scared of the King ... they should be. They say, 'What's with the King?' and my answer is 'It's better than clowns.'"

With BK's fortunes apparently changing, franchisees were much less likely to question the irreverent Crispin promotional tactics, whether they liked them or not. And why would they? With the young male demographic providing nearly half of all

Burger King visits, Mr. Salgueiro said it best: "All opinions boil down to traffic and sales. Once that happens, everybody has to shut up with their opinion. We have a very old franchisee base at this point and some of us don't understand our customers. We have a lot of gray hair."

## NO END IN SIGHT

The creative ads have continued to flow, including the humorous series to promote the Western Whopper. The spots, based on the tagline, "Bring out your inner cowboy," featured people from all walks of life developing huge handlebar mustaches after eating Burger King fare. The ads were accompanied by a link to [www.petmoustache.com](http://www.petmoustache.com), where people could register, upload a photo, and design a custom mustache. The mustache would then take on a life of its own. "It sends you e-mails that say, 'Hey, I miss you and why haven't you waxed me?' If you neglect it, it grows willy-nilly and wild," explained Rob Reilly, a creative director for Crispin.

But the most recent BK/Crispin promotional tactic took things to a whole new level. For the 50th anniversary of the Whopper, Crispin created the "Whopper Freakout" campaign. In doing so, Crispin did something it had never done before. Mr. Reilly explained the reasoning behind what can only be described as Whopper deprivation:

If you really want to prove [that the Whopper is still America's favorite burger] put your money where your mouth is and let's take it off the menu and film natural reactions from people. We knew technically we could pull it off, but this is really a social experiment, that's the new ground we're breaking, using a social experiment as marketing. There's no fake dialogue, no fake customers. We were really testing this: If you deprive people of a thing they love, even down to a hamburger, will they react with a thing that's visceral?

Visceral is truly what they got. The eight-minute film is taken from the perspective of hidden cameras in a real Burger King restaurant. After being told by employees that the Whopper had been discontinued, customers revolt in a way that only truly distraught brand-loyal fans could. In the movie, customers scoff, twitch, roll their heads, demand to speak to managers, and even yell. Some of the more wistful subjects give folksy anecdotes about family bonding and passage into manhood, all based on the Whopper.

Crispin plugged the film's Web site with 30-second spot ads and then let the viral-marketing forces take over. The results were nothing short of astounding. The microsite received more than one million visits at an average logged time of 8:33. But what really stood out was that visitors watched the video in its entirety four million times, meaning that most visitors watched several times. Multiple parodies of the ad emerged on the Web. The campaign won a 2008 *Creativity* magazine award and IAG research found recall of the campaign to be the highest of any it had seen in its six-year history.

But all these measures amount to very little if the overall objective is not achieved. On that score, Crispin has delivered in spades for the flame-broiler. Burger King is in its fourth consecutive year of same-store sales growth. Not only is it growing, but BK is currently delivering a solid thrashing to McDonald's and Wendy's, who are blaming the recession, housing crisis, and fuel

prices for sluggish growth. BK 2007 systemwide revenue reached \$13.2 billion, up nearly 60 percent since Crispin assumed the account. Burger King is also showing healthy profits, rising stock prices, and strong international growth.

Many analysts are giving Crispin's promotional efforts the bulk of the credit for Burger King's success. "They're doing a super job on the advertising front," said UBS analyst David Palmer. "They're clearly connecting with the super fan that is the young, hungry male." Despite the previous speculation that Crispin would fail, the firm is now into its fifth year as Burger King's promotional agency, with no sign of being shown the door. As long as Crispin continues to hit home runs with its creative promotions, its franchisees, shareholders, and customers alike will continue to shout, "Long live the King!"

### Questions for Discussion

1. What are Burger King's communication objectives for its target audience?
2. With its focus on the "super fan," does BK risk alienating other customers? What are the implications of this?

3. Why is viral or buzz marketing effective? Analyze the design of the Subservient Chicken Web site's message, including content, structure, and format. What can you conclude from this analysis?
4. Do the TV and viral elements of BK's campaigns work well together? What additional elements and media might Crispin add to the integrated marketing communications campaign?
5. What other recommendations would you make to BK and Crispin to help them improve the integration of Burger King's promotion mix?

**Sources:** Emily Bryson York, "Economy, Rivals, No Match for BK's Marketing," *Advertising Age*, May 5, 2008, p.4; "Burger King: Whopper Freakout," *Creativity*, May 1, 2008, p. 76; Kevin, Kingsbury, "Burger King Swings to Net Profit," *Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2007, accessed online at [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com); Barbara Lippert, "King of All Media," *Adweek*, November 20, 2006, accessed online at [www.adweek.com](http://www.adweek.com); Kamau High, "BK Intros 'Inner Cowboy,'" *Adweek*, June 5, 2007, accessed online at [www.adweek.com](http://www.adweek.com); Kate Macarthur, "BK Rebels Fall in Love with King," *Advertising Age*, May 1, 2006, p. 1; Elaine Walker, "Franchisees, Burger King Work to Mend Rift," *Miami Herald*, March 27, 2006.