

5 of the Wildest, Craziest Marketing Stunts We've Seen from Taco Bell

February 13, 2021 8 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

Easily one of the most popular consumer brands in the United States, Taco Bell is a name practically every American knows for its distinctive gastronomic offerings. “Taco Bell is unique in the sense that there’s not really a major competitor to it in that space,” Georgia State University Franchise Entrepreneurship Professor Benjamin Lawrence said in our feature article about the company topping the 2020 Franchise 500 ranking.

This year, despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, Taco Bell retains its top spot on *Entrepreneur’s* 2021 Franchise 500 ranking. The advantage of being in a “category of one” appears to remain strongly in effect.

It’s also noteworthy that Taco Bell has a clear understanding of its target market – millennials. As it shifted its target customers from family diners to working and job-seeking millennials, it continuously innovated and delivered enhanced customer experiences. Of note, Taco Bell took digitalization so seriously that it became the first quick-service restaurant to offer an order-and-pay-ahead scheme through a mobile app.

“There is no one out there like us,” said then-Vice President of Technology, Rafik Hanna, in a keynote presentation at the ICX Summit in Dallas. “We march to the beat of our own drum.

Innovation and creativity are part of our DNA.”

Related: How Taco Bell Is Becoming the World’s Most Innovative Franchise

But enough of Taco Bell’s history. In light of the company’s top franchise citation, it is worth revisiting five of the most creative and attention-grabbing marketing campaigns Taco Bell has done so far. The company, founded by Glen Bell in California, does not excel only because of its relatively unique position in the fast-food market. It also has a knack for hosting some of the craziest and wildest marketing stunts. Let’s count down their top five crazies.

1. Debris pitch game on the Pacific Ocean

Russia’s modular space station Mir was scheduled to deorbit on March 23, 2001. Taco Bell’s marketing team took advantage of this globally-covered event to launch a ridiculously impressive promotion.

The company set up a gigantic floating target board into the Pacific Ocean, where Mir’s debris was expected to fall. According to the announced promo mechanics, everyone in the United States would be entitled to get a free Taco Bell taco if a piece of the space station landed on the floating target board.

This stunt was extremely risky for the company’s finances so Taco Bell purchased a sizable insurance policy to cover the potential costs of giving away more than 280 million free tacos. The insurer estimated the cost to be around \$10 million.

All of Mir burned up as it entered Earth’s atmosphere, so no part of the space station reached the floating target. Taco Bell won the risky gamble as it gained global media coverage

for the stunt and increased brand awareness and sales.

2. Steal a base, steal a taco

In 2007, Taco Bell started another free-taco-for-everyone promo linked to the World Series. This time the likelihood of Taco Bell “losing” and customers “winning” was dramatically higher. Taco Bell announced that if any player from either of the competing teams stole a base in the World Series, everyone in the United States would get free tacos.

Boston Red Sox’s Jacoby Ellsbury managed to steal a base in Game 2 of the 2007 World Series. The company delivered on its promise and gave away tacos to American customers on October 30, 2007.

Taco Bell apparently realized that the promo to give all Americans free tacos does not cost as much as they earlier projected in the Mir space station stunt. Not everyone goes to a Taco Bell store and asks for the prize. Also, the company imposed a one taco per person limit and a 2 pm to 6 pm duration for claiming the free taco.

The company decided to do the same marketing campaign for several other World Series events, the latest of which was in 2020, where Los Angeles Dodgers’ Mookie Betts stole a base in Game 1. This was the ninth time Taco Bell gave away free tacos.

3. The Hoax Coax

In mid-2012, Taco Bell learned about a hoax spreading in Bethel, Alaska, which claimed that the company was set to open in the town of a little over 6,000 people. The company clarified it was not true and went beyond by doing something the national media and social media sites were sure to cover.

Taco Bell’s Irvine franchise sent a Taco Bell truck to the

remote town using a helicopter. The truck had enough ingredients to prepare up to 10,000 tacos. It carried hundreds of pounds of beef, sour cream, tomatoes, lettuce and cheddar cheese.

Today, there are still no plans to open a Taco Bell franchise in Bethel. However, the well-received act was surely remembered by those in Alaska, some of whom said it was the first time they tasted tacos again after decades. The story also continues to appear online in various publications.

4. Pop-up hotel with unlimited free tacos

Before Covid hit, Taco Bell successfully launched another promotional campaign that attracted widespread interest. In May 2019, the company announced the opening of a pop-up hotel in Palm Spring, Calif. The fully furnished Taco Bell themed hotel was set to be open for only four days and came with the guarantee of free unlimited tacos for guests.

In less than two minutes, the hotel was already fully booked. The rooms started at \$169 per night. The hotel had a salon as well as a gift shop that sold Taco Bell themed clothes and other merchandise.

Taco Bell once again gained free media coverage with many online news sites and at least one TV station featuring the story. Notably, the headlines focused on how the short-lived pop-up hotel sold all of its vacancies in a couple of minutes, showing how many customers are interested in the brand.

5. The April Fools' Taco Liberty Bell

Even back in 1996, when internet penetration was not that high

and social media was nonexistent, Taco Bell already showed an affinity to viral marketing. The company launched an April Fools' joke that turned out to be a bit controversial but somehow worth doing for the sake of free media coverage.

On April 1, 1996, the company ran an ad in *The New York Times* that boldly declared, "Taco Bell Buys the Liberty Bell." The rest of the ad expressed the company's pleasure of having purchased one of the symbols of American independence, saying that "it will now be called the 'Taco Liberty Bell' and will still be accessible to the American public for viewing."

The prank ad resulted in thousands of people calling the National Park in Philadelphia to complain about the sale of the national treasure. Taco Bell eventually revealed the joke. The hullabaloo was a win for the company as it saw its revenues increase by \$500,000 on the day of the stunt and a higher increase of \$600,000 the day after. *Entrepreneur* considers this one of the most successful marketing stunts ever.

Viral marketing is said to have started in the mid-1990s. Arguably, Taco Bell is one of the earliest users of this promotional strategy as evidenced by the prank ad. The company has since continued taking advantage of this style of indirect advertising and has been successful in doing so.

Related: Taco Bell Is Working With Beyond Meat to Create a New Plant-Based Protein

Initiative to take on big ideas

What makes Taco Bell different in its approach to viral marketing, though, is the willingness to try explosive ideas others have not tried before or are afraid to attempt doing. Instead of fearing the possible backlash, the company explored fresh concepts many would likely find ridiculous but inevitably pay some attention to.

Taco Bell knows how to make people talk about its brand. For the company, it appears the objective is to launch something that people will notice and discuss instead of putting out creative campaigns that eventually become viral.

This is in line with the company's focus on targeting millennials. In the age of widespread internet access and social media, Taco Bell acknowledges that the traditional advertising styles of fast-food chains handing out flyers and posting print and billboard ads are no longer as effective as they used to be.

Taco Bell understands its market and knows how to leverage social media. "The way I believe our brand is positioned is it's a brand that drives culture," said Taco Bell President Brian Niccol in an interview with *Entrepreneur*.

Modern culture is largely shaped by social media and the online world. With its strong social media presence, Taco Bell sees to it that it catches the attention of its potential customers while riding on free coverage and the benefits of word of mouth marketing through the internet. Taco Bell is being regarded as a social media superstar with more than 10 million Facebook likes and nearly 10 million followers, more than 1 million Twitter followers, and hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram.

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/364642>