Bracket Busters and Blowouts: March Brandness Heats Up

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This post was created in partnership with Nativo.

After a wild first round, eight brands are moving on in the March Brandness tournament—powered by Nativo's Brand Rank—with upsets, dominations, and narrow victories. Consumer consideration decided the scoreboard, with over 1,000 U.S. shoppers answering: *Which brand are you most likely to buy?*

Still in the game:
Capital One, Coca-Cola, Geico, Great Clips, TurboTax, Bonvoy, Reese's, and Home Depot.

Heading home:

AT&T, Buffalo Wild Wings, Buick, Pizza Hut, LG, Nabisco, Nissan, and Unilever.

Final Four matchups:

- Capital One vs. Coca-Cola
- Geico vs. Great Clips
- TurboTax vs. Bonvoy
- Reese's vs. Home Depot

To break it all down, I caught up with Greg Friend, vp of strategy & innovation at Nativo, for a post-round recap. His first take? A decisive win in one of the round's biggest matchups: Capital One vs. AT&T.

"Capital One didn't just win—they dominated," Friend told me. "This one came down to category dynamics."

According to Friend, Capital One's branding advantage was clear from the start. Its competitors—big-name banks like Chase and Bank of America—can feel dated or impersonal. "But Capital One has done a fantastic job positioning itself as the approachable, consumer-first bank," he said, pointing to its digital innovation and *What's in Your Wallet?* campaign.

AT&T, on the other hand, had a tougher hill to climb. "Wireless carriers are a dogfight," Friend said. "People don't love their providers; they tolerate them. The margin for differentiation in wireless is razor-thin, and consumers are often just picking the least frustrating option. That's a much harder game to win than banking, where people choose their institution more intentionally. AT&T was the top choice for nearly a third of consumers at 28%, but it just wasn't enough to topple Capital One."

Another tight match? Coca-Cola vs. Buffalo Wild Wings. "That was a game of inches," Friend said. "If you ran it ten times, I bet BWW wins a few."

So, what gave Coke the final edge? Brand gravity. “It’s Coke,” he said. “They’ve built an emotional connection that’s hard to shake. They’re the classic. People reach for Coke without thinking.”

Buffalo Wild Wings still impressed. “They went toe-to-toe with a legacy brand and nearly pulled off the win. But they’re fighting in a tougher category. Restaurants like Applebee’s and Wingstop have wide appeal. BWW’s brand is strong, but the competition is fierce.”

One match wasn’t close at all. “Home Depot didn’t just win—it was a clinic,” Friend said. “Home Depot dominated its competitors, while Unilever struggled to gain traction as the top pick for just 10% of consumers. But before we call this a blowout and move on, let’s talk about *why* this matchup was so lopsided.”

“Home Depot was up against Lowe’s, Menards, Ace Hardware, and True Value—all respectable names in home improvement—but the brand’s dominance in the category is undeniable. Home Depot is the go-to for pros and DIYers alike. When consumers think about *where* to go for home projects, it’s Home Depot. That kind of top-of-mind awareness is tough to beat,” Friend explained.

Unilever also faced another challenge. “They’ve got incredible products—Dove, Ben & Jerry’s, Hellmann’s—but the master brand doesn’t show up in the same way. People love the items—not necessarily the company behind them,” Friend explained.

As we look ahead to the Elite 8, Friend’s eyes are on two key matchups: “Capital One vs. Coca-Cola is the classic No. 1 vs. No. 1. But TurboTax is lurking. It’s tax season, and they own that space. That’s a sneaky advantage.”

He’s also watching Great Clips. “They’re not flashy, but they’re reliable. Affordable, convenient, and everywhere.

That’s how upsets happen.”

The updated bracket is live, and full scorecards for eliminated brands are available. Round Two tips off now—and with it, the race to the Final Four.

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