

Disrupt the Annual Brand Prank War by Focusing on Strategy, Not Stunts

Inspiration meets innovation at [Brandweek](#), the ultimate marketing experience. Join industry luminaries, rising talent and strategic experts in Phoenix, Arizona this September 23–26 to assess challenges, develop solutions and create new pathways for growth. [Register early to save.](#)

Dunkin' is now Donuts'. If you were groggily scrolling social media on April 1, you may have briefly fallen victim to one of many brand pranks: Califia Farms unveiling a pickle-flavored creamer, the Duolingo owl starring in a multilingual musical on ice, and Nathan's Famous hotdogs coming aboard JetBlue.

April Fools' Day has evolved from a half-holiday hinging upon the gullibility of your friends to endless brand stunts. As brands have grown in their "self-awareness" on social media (adopting more personable tones and trying to outbid each other for followers, attention and impact), their April Fools' stunts have also ramped up.

As a fan of brand pranks large and small, it's always a thrill to see who will cut through the noise. But it leaves one wondering: What if brands were to treat every day like April Fools' Day? Here's how they can do it.

Know your audience

Now that brands are expected to perform on April Fools' Day, it has become harder and harder to stand out in a circus of stunts. However, the more in tune with your audience you are, the more you can strategically employ a stunt that will create enough conversation without having to do a multiday stunt or high-spend activation.

For instance, the pineapple on pizza debate has been raging for internet centuries. So when Domino's announced it was removing pineapple from its menu, the restaurant chain knew it would spark conversation and reignite debate in the comments—without having to lift much of a finger or try to top other brand stunts.

While Domino's prank was a clear winner, not all pranks are—and it comes down to knowing your audience. A well-executed joke that audiences want to share can increase brand loyalty and recognition, but one that purposely misleads the audience can do more harm than good. If you're not cognizant of what your audience will genuinely find funny, you could risk, at minimum, coming off as insensitive and, at maximum, become a member of the internet's Hall of Shame and lose reputability.

Timing is everything

As the Dunkin' April Fools' post read, the brand was “going thru it rn” and felt like poking fun at its original name change from Dunkin' Donuts to simply Dunkin' in 2019. The post racked up tens of thousands of likes, with fans quickly catching that this name change was merely an April Fools' Day prank. A few hours later, the Dunkin' social team unveiled a new merch line to capitalize on the fun.

Dunkin's strategy is solid; it was contained to its socials to

drive engagement, with a multiple-post ecosystem existing before the merch launch. Strategy, like a good story, always needs a solid beginning, middle and end. Without it, stunts can feel hollow.

Alternatively, Sour Patch Kids announced last week on X that it is rebranding to Sour Patch Adults, saying “it’s time to grow up.” The brand chose to initiate early and then revealed that it was “just kid-ding” on April 1.

We’re seeing this more consistently; brands recognize that to capitalize on the now brand-dominated holiday that requires unawareness from the consumer, they have to start rolling out their stunt prior to the actual holiday itself.

The risk of the Sour Patch Kids strategy is that consumers are smarter than ever and can smell April Fools’ Day a mile away. Although their stunt generated initial buzz, it can be difficult to maintain for days at a time. And if it doesn’t lead to something big, like a new product or a merch line, fans can be left wondering about the point of the stunt. If conversation is the goal, then this can probably be at most a two-day stunt, to maximize the potential for conversation without running the risk of having to sustain over the course of four or five days.

Go bigger

For brands, it’s much easier to justify doing something stunt-y if someone else has done something like it or if everyone’s doing it. And April Fools’ has become a blank check for agencies to do the ideas they’ve perhaps always wanted to but couldn’t, for a litany of reasons.

The best agencies, however, create content that meets clients’ needs and resonates organically among the brand’s audience at the same time. Brand participation in April Fools’ has tipped the scale too far in one direction and has often forgotten about the consumer. Audiences love a well-executed stunt, but

as taste evolves and the space becomes filled, the cost of these stunts is going to continue to inflate.

Set your goals first, and craft the strategy to support those goals. Short-lived stunts may not provide much more payoff than increased engagement that is contained to one day, unless leading to an end goal, like Dunkin's new merch. Engagement plays are not a bad call, but they need a clear narrative to feel rounded out.

If you want to truly make an impact, consider a larger campaign that goes beyond an Instagram post. There's nothing wrong with the short-lived engagement plays mentioned above, but they, by design, do not create lasting impact. They're confined to the day, forced to live and die within hours or a few days leading up. Consider using April Fools' as a day to launch, with the campaign finding legs outside of the half-holiday's imaginary walls.

Consider the why: Does this stunt have to take place on April Fools' Day? Would it make more impact when other brands aren't doing similar activations? Is the only justification for the stunt that it's April Fools' Day and brands have to participate? What does it look like to ladder the stunt under an overarching campaign?

Break through the walls of April Fools' and use this as a massive blip on the radar to bring life to a longer campaign.

Recommended articles

<https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/april-fools-day-brand-pranks-strategy/>