Why Potbelly Is the Brand You Should Be Watching for Social Creativity

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9 hours ago
Potbelly was on its way to a new era.

The sandwich chain had found a new CMO in Brandon Rhoten, the digital marketing pioneer who'd turned Wendy's into one of the most dominant social media voices in the brand universe. He had led an extensive research project that uncovered a key growth opportunity, and new creative was under way to achieve that new brand positioning.

There was only one problem: The new positioning was playing up Potbelly as "the place to go for a lunch break," just as a looming pandemic was about to eradicate the idea of a group lunch outing.

Despite dine-in orders making up a daunting 75% of the chain's business pre-pandemic, Potbelly has managed to keep most of its 500 locations open for delivery and curbside takeout—while also finding creative ways to build on its emerging image as a place to gather for lunch.

Take, for example, this week's charming social video from Potbelly showing brand creative director Hassan Ali "delivering" sandwiches to the marketing team:

Made through no-frills practical effects (like having loved ones lob sandwiches from out of frame), the video is a perfect example of marketing creativity with little risk or investment in the COVID-19 era. In just one 30-minute Zoom call, the

marketing team humanized the brand and continued building a “place to go for a lunch break” positioning that might have seemed impossible during global quarantine.

That video is just one small piece of the marketing pivot Potbelly has had to make as its entire industry was rapidly upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

“We changed our media plans, we changed our creative, we hanged our social approach,” Rhoten told Adweek. “Everything shifted within a matter of 10 days.”

But he said the “Potbelly Lunch Break” Zoom call also shows how the team has used this challenging time to find new ways to connect with loyal fans and potential customers alike.

The Zoom video was born from an ongoing discussion the team has around one question: “What are the ways we bring lunch breaks to life?”

One aspect of the quarantine era that’s resonated with the brand is the continued (and perhaps increased) need for lunch breaks and other opportunities to break away from work for a short time during the day.

“The break still matters,” Rhoten said. “In fact, people need that more than ever.”

Interestingly, Potbelly was already injecting itself into conference call culture long before the pandemic made video meetups a daily part of business life. Last year, the chain partnered with Uber Conference to replace its mid-day hold music with a branded song about how lunch would be a better use of the time.

Potbelly also offered to recruit a voice double who could sit in for you on a (voice-only) conference call while you sneak away for lunch:

[embedded content]

This vibe of playful helpfulness continued in the sandwich chain's content after the world went into lockdown at home. Like other brands that have released recipes to the public during the quarantine, Potbelly also had its head chef share advice on how to make the chain's signature Wreck sandwich at home:

And in philosophical solidarity with brands like Steak-umm, Potbelly has also been heartfelt in its occasional bits of advice and support on Twitter:

> *we're all worried about physical health, but emotional health is important too*
>
> *turn off the news for a day this week, play a game via zoom with friends, take a crazy long lunch break*
>
> *we all need to be in a good mental place to make the world better on the other side of this*
>
> *— Potbelly (@Potbelly)* ***April 12, 2020***

> *if you're exhausted and frustrated, know that most are feeling the same*
>
> *human contact and socialization are critical for emotional health*
>
> *remind yourself it's the situation, and the situation is temporary*
>
> *— Potbelly (@Potbelly)* ***April 14, 2020***

Rhoten said he learned from his time at Wendy's—where he was head of advertising, social media, media and digital marketing until 2017, before shifting briefly to being Papa John's CMO—that the key to social success is experimenting with a wide range of low-cost ideas and seeing what gets traction with fans.

The unifying thread is one of tone, which he describes at Potbelly as a “heartfelt sentiment that feels like it’s connected to the brand.”

“Some things will work, but a lot won’t,” he said. “And that’s OK. We’re not going to put all our eggs in any one basket. We just have to be consistent in what we put out into the world.”

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