Why the Edible Pop-Tarts Bowl Mascot Will Live On in Marketing

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College football bowl games are steeped in history and tradition, a staple of the sporting calendar for more than a century.

But some fans are beginning to voice their displeasure from the sidelines, with the sheer number of games becoming a particular sticking point. The 2023-24 season boasts a whopping 43 bowl games, with many falling outside the national championship. Even the Rose Bowl, arguably the best-known of them all, is more famous for its parade than the game itself.

That all changed one cold December night last year when an anthropomorphized toaster pastry named Strawberry was lowered into a giant toaster at Camping World Stadium in Orlando, Fla. Cooked up by the marketing gurus at Pop-Tarts, this was the first-ever edible mascot in sports history, with the Kansas State Wildcats tearing into it after the game.

Pop-Tarts is no stranger to entertainment. The short-lived 1966 Batman Kellogg’s comics series helped the brand become a childhood favorite, and its sustained popularity has paved the way for a Jerry Seinfeld-starring Netflix film in the works, Unfrosted: The Pop-Tart Story.

Strawberry’s stunt catapulted Pop-Tarts into the mainstream once more. But the mascot’s short yet glorious life goes beyond simply a trending topic. The Pop-Tarts Bowl is a pop culture phenomenon that brought out the best of social media and, in doing so, baked the brand into football and marketing lore.

It’s a touchdown

Whether it’s Duke’s Mayo or Chick-fil-A Peach, the college football scene is a welcome home for food and drink sponsors. But a brand name alone isn’t enough to cut the mustard.

While whimsical, Strawberry wasn’t a random, shot-in-the-dark attempt at driving brand awareness. Pop-Tarts’ publicity stunt is forecast to earn the brand more than $12 million in exposure, which stems from following the well-known, well-worn recipe of The Hero’s Journey:

- An ordinary, inanimate pastry hears the call to adventure and becomes Strawberry, now life-sized and full of life through supernatural aid
- Strawberry’s transformation begins as challenges and temptations abound, like almost being licked by a

football player
- Strawberry meets the abyss, a martyr figure experiencing death at the hands and mouths of the victors
- And finally rebirth, as a meme that will live on, finding new life as people make Strawberry's story their own (and Pop-Tarts leaders hint we'll see the mascot again soon)

The Pop-Tarts Bowl serves as a good reminder to trade in evoking emotion and connection; sometimes it's the simple story templates and archetypes that pop.

Drawing up the perfect play

When a marketing campaign generates this much buzz, it's only a matter of time before someone brings out the cookie cutter.

However, the luster was already lacking when Cheez-It unveiled its non-edible mascot on New Year's Day. While the same agency and marketing minds might be behind both (Pop-Tarts parent company Kellanova is a spinoff of Cheez-It maker Kellogg's), the reality is that the bit is already old.

Strawberry's ascendance at the Pop-Tarts Bowl was pure. Nobody saw it coming. It followed the marketing mantra of my former boss, Odwalla and Califia Farms founder Greg Steltenpohl: Show up when and where you're never expected to be. That's why he used to run print ads for orange juice in fishing magazines in the '80s.

Incongruity and absurdity run through the heart of the Strawberry fanfare. The mascot's twisted facial expression, the implicit (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) agreement that he was going to "die" at the end of the game. Its nihilistic tone played a major part in the stunt catching fire among audiences.

Flip the coin, and it's the absence of that "Are they really

doing this?!” factor that made Cheez-It’s copycat attempt fall a little flat.

A quick glance at the stats reveals that Pop-Tarts’ bowl shenanigans generated oodles of social currency; ESPN’s TikTok of Strawberry has racked up more than 4 million views, and Kellanova’s CMO confirmed it’s the single biggest earned-media campaign the brand has had.

Time to run the option

The bowl season may be over, but brand marketers are already on the clock to come up with next year’s Strawberry.

Let’s hope we all remember the most poignant lesson Strawberry taught us: It’s in the end that many things become meaningful. So let it end and don’t be a copycat.

Instead, let’s ask: Does our brand have a play within its unique personality that can follow the recipe of equal parts absurdity and simplicity? Where can we go where we’re not expected to be?

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