

Ring in a Successful Campaign: Taco Bell's **“The Bell” Hotel**

MEJO 531: Case Studies in Public Relations Midterm
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Part One: Synopsis

Background

Taco Bell is an American fast food chain well-known for its large and passionate fan base. The Yum! Brands subsidiary has a mission statement of “we take pride in making the best Mexican style fast food providing fast, friendly, and accurate service. We are the employer of choice offering team members’ opportunities for growth, advancement, and rewarding careers in a fun, safe working environment.” The public targeted were influencers, Taco Bell customers and media outlets. The stakeholders were PepsiCo, Yum! Brands, Taco Bell executives and employees. Their audience was so aggressively targeted because the fan base is what makes Taco Bell such a powerful brand due to their passion and presence. The company knew that if they got their fans on board with the hotel, there would be a rise in interest in Taco Bell because of all of the content the consumers push out on their own.

The Event

From August 8th through the 12th, Taco Bell created an immersive experience for its fans and consumers. The brand developed a hotel in Palm Spring, California under the name of “The Bell” with a complete Taco Bell theme. The object of The Bell was an attempt to expand the brand image as a holistic entity. The already hospitable brand wanted to take their connections with their fans a step further. “We decided to use the hotel opportunity to really engage with our fans,” said senior director of retail engagement and experience, Jennifer Arnoldt. This social media paradise was teased to the public months prior to opening with an 11 second video to induce buzz from influencers and news outlets. The hotel sold out in two minutes to only 400 guests with rooms ranging from \$169 to \$269. This experience was the biggest expression of Taco Bell lifestyle to date and reinforced the brand as a cool and hip holistic immersion. The hotel boasted a gift shop with exclusive merchandise, an on-site salon, performances by up-and-coming musicians, a feature-length movie showing, a Mountain Dew Baja Blast lounge and exclusive menu items.

The Response

With more than 5,000 articles written about the hotel, the campaign garnered 4.4 billion impressions from the public. Influencers were encouraged to come to the hotel and post about the Instagram-worthy “tacoasis,” attracting millions of dollars of free advertising. There was no neutral opinion about the hotel, whether the reaction was positive or negative, the campaign got people talking. Edelman and United Entertainment Group spent two years preparing the campaign in order to produce authentic, fun and outrageous content for the public. The brand also received information and data from those interested in the experience whenever a potential consumer inputted their email into the website database. The campaign was considered a great success for Taco Bell and sky-rocketed their social media presence. Evidentially, a connection was the plan all along. “Fans want a one-on-one relationship with our brand, beyond the food,” said Arnoldt. Overall, Taco Bell wanted this opportunity to reflect the authenticity of the brand in the eyes of social media and the public.

Part Two: Analysis

Point 1: The event should be a reflection of the whole brand experience.

In order for a campaign to create buzz and properly reach out to a choice audience, the experience should provide the public with **an authentic, interactive and accessible platform**. The authenticity of the brand allows the audience to trust an event that strays from the typical product line. If the public feels as though they can trust the brand then they will eagerly invest in the next big thing they produce. This leads to them wanting to interact with the company culture. An interactive experience allows consumers to express their opinions on multiple platforms. The general consumer immersing themselves in the experience gives way to a connection between the company identity, the event and the target audience.

In the case of The Bell hotel, the brand embodying an authentic experience is evident in the small details that the company put into the overall immersion. While the hotel is aesthetically pleasing, every single detail of the immersion was in order to make the public feel as though they were having a one-of-a-kind experience. Between the décor in the hotel rooms, the exclusive Taco Bell chef creations and Instagram-worthy backdrops, each guest felt as though they were getting an individualized stay at the niche hotel. This authenticity made the experience much more interactive for the guests who were able to pump out free content and publicity for those anxiously awaiting news about the experience all over the internet. This idea is similar to the entire and holistic brand image that the Go RVing campaign represented. The Go RVing “AWAY” campaign focused on building an online audience and community through a variety of social media platforms. The campaign brought in a level of authenticity by sharing RV adventures and videos on a plethora of platforms, just as the Taco Bell hotel did through its media savvy guests. Authenticity is what made the risk of a hotel so successful for a fast-food chain. Mike Kelly, co-founder and CEO of State of Mind Partners, even discussed how a hotel would not fit for every chain but it is right for Taco Bell due to its strong fan base and niche branded products.

This interactive quality of the hotel allowed Taco Bell to gain more attention from audiences who would not normally be interested in Taco Bell content. These audiences included people generally interested in the adventures of their friends or the niche quality of the brand experience Taco Bell was creating. Similarly, the Go RVing campaign really emphasized consumer-focused marketing efforts and giving their consumers immersive and experiential events. More than 150,000 RV-loving consumers get tours of RVs at a variety of events, connecting with the brand through hands-on experiences with the product. Due to a positive interactive experience, audiences can then spread the RV culture to people all over the world. For Taco Bell, the people pumping out social media content were able to show how Taco Bell went above and beyond in order to let everyone have access to a celebrity treatment.

The hotel experience was being sold at a price that would be affordable to any average Taco Bell consumer and did not require a special invitation. Taco Bell was pushing the idea that they treat their audience like they are unique, no matter who they are. This accessibility allowed the whole campaign to fit into their brand image of excitement and immersion instead of a pretentious social media grab for attention. As for the Go RVing campaign, the project is centered around the mission statement that the company focuses on “the freedom of RV travel and building a desire and passion of the adventures that await.” The RV campaign stays with the

brand image by focusing on accessibility by emphasizing that anyone can be a part of RV travel as long as they are open to be passionate about it. The ease of entry to this brand culture is very similar to that of the affordability that the The Bell has.

Point 2: Niche campaigns grab attention.

Niche campaigns are a great way to specifically target a set of consumers who could benefit from and respond appropriately to a product or experience. This style of campaign can produce **media presence, give the brand a clear direction and make their intentions transparent to the public.** The social media presence can not only come from the average audience, but also major influencers who target the niche area of the campaign with immersive content. This media connection makes the loyal audience feel as though they are being valued by the brand, as their commitment to the company is an integral part of who they are. This leads into the idea that a niche and committed campaign makes it so that the audience feels as though they can trust the brand going forward and see their true intentions. Transparency throughout a niche campaign is key because the brand is targeting a unique audience that wants to feel connected to the company.

The Bell is very representative of a niche campaign. The social media presence that The Bell created was what gave the campaign the title of “one of the best public relations campaigns of the year.” This campaign induced over 4.4 billion impressions from the public and over 5,000 articles on the internet. Not only was there an outrageous amount of buzz concerning the hotel due to the ambiguity surrounding the whole event, but also top influencer and companies who characterized the brand gave first hand experiences of their opinions on the campaign. Jeffree Star, a billionaire, YouTuber and self-proclaimed Taco Bell addict, produced a detailed YouTube video about the hotel to his 17.5 million subscribers that has attracted over 13 million views. BuzzFeed’s YouTube channel gave the hotel a full spotlight that was enticing clickbait for the average internet surfer. Having top platforms discuss the experience to a broader audience made the 400-person hotel an immersive campaign for people all around the world. A good example of another brand that used a niche campaign to reach out to their audience was Hallmark. The Hallmark campaign created a strong media presence by going on tour in order to leverage media exposure with one-on-one customer interaction. The emotional stories shared throughout this tour about their cards and the brand created 131 million media impressions. Just like Hallmark, by using a method of garnering media attention that was authentic to the audience, Taco Bell was able to increase their media presence exponentially. Personally, I have never been to a Taco Bell but I found myself drawn to these YouTube videos and articles just out of sheer curiosity. Therefore, the quirkiness and inventiveness behind The Bell campaign made the average internet explorer curious to learn more.

Taco Bell expressed a desire to be seen as a brand that is holistically creative and fun. By creating a niche and dramatic campaign, the brand felt more like a lifestyle than strictly a fast food restaurant that a select audience enjoys. Their direction was pointed much more toward building an identity in the age of social media rather than a money grab for attention. The company knew that their consumers see the true value in Taco Bell beyond a cooperate organization so they trusted the ability for the campaign to successfully hit an audience. After selling out in two minutes, this trust in the identity came true. “Taco Bell fans are truly one of a kind and today was one of the best expressions of that fandom yet,” said Chief Global Brand Officer Marisa Thalberg. Comparatively, the Hallmark campaign developed a clear brand image

by showing the testimonials from real people about the cards. The goal of the campaign was for it to be “built around our DNA” and about expanding the existing audience to generate attention for the event. They also reached out to a specific audience by contacting Hallmark Gold Crown members as well as putting fliers in places that would attract Hallmark lovers. This method wrangled niche members of the community just like the Taco Bell buzz video did prior to the hotel dates.

This value falls in line with the transparency of Taco Bell’s intentions in regard to their brand image. This campaign was very targeted; not everybody has the strongest desire to stay at a taco themed hotel, or “tacoasis,” with specialty items and foods. However, the commitment to the details of the campaign and the two years put into reaching out to that niche sector of consumers gave Taco Bell an authentic brand image that grabbed the attention of people all over the world. As for making intentions transparent to the public in the Hallmark campaign, the humility of the employees sharing their stories about the cards made the attempt to expand the brand feel authentic. The Hallmark campaign chose to locate the events in a casual setting in order to keep the campaign from seeming too commercial. The brand actually had the intention to connect with the audience on a personal level rather than to strictly generate impressions. So, in the case of Taco Bell, although the campaign was aimed at a small group, the outcome was a display of how much they care about their audience. Senior director of retail engagement and experience, Jennifer Arnoldt, emphasized that the hotel was “a way to bring fans together and provide experiences for them they couldn’t get anywhere else.” This honest statement combatted the idea that the hotel was strictly a publicity stunt for the brand to rake in money.

Point 3: Work with the existing brand image.

A successful campaign can stem from a trustworthy and existing image that a brand represents in the public’s eyes. It is important for a brand to work with this image in order to **capture the trust of the audience, remain authentic to the brand message and create lasting connections with the public.** The trust of the audience lies in whether the brand feels reliable and stable. A dramatic switch up of brand image can either make or break a company. Many target audiences want to feel comfortable with who and what they are getting into. Therefore, the authenticity of the brand message is what makes the target audience want to stay loyal. A half-baked mission or message will make the audience feel unappreciated and forgotten about. Finally, a lasting connection with the public is what allows the target audience to want to fully immerse themselves in the culture of the company and be open to new ideas for the brand.

Prior to the event, the fans knew absolutely nothing about the hotel they booked. They did not know that there was going to be complementary food, the unique experiences provided or the performances from the musicians. The fans knew, however, to trust what the brand has produced in the past. Taco Bell was spot-on with properly utilizing the existing brand image and that is evident in the amount of detail as well as Taco Bell themed content they created for this four-day event. Between the sauce packet themed pool floats, individualized Taco Bell food creations, specialized hotel rooms and a Baja Blast freeze room, The Bell did not leave behind a single aspect of the brand. The audience was given the chance to trust Taco Bell by recreating their favorite aspects of the brand on a large scale. Each detail felt familiar to them and allowed them to embrace the campaign and fully appreciate the brand that they loved. Similarly, the Salem campaign was effectively and efficiently able to garner the trust of the audience by creating a comfortable and reliable brand that had something for everyone. Branded as “Still

Making History” with a sailboat or witches hat, the audience can recognize that Salem is not only embracing their image but also planning on continuing to expand their brand image going forward.

This is also in line with the authenticity that Taco Bell had throughout the whole experience. Their “Live Más” slogan was a huge inspiration for the campaign and they emphasized doing so at a larger-than-life Taco Bell immersion. The audience felt as though they were receiving the best of the best from Taco Bell and they were a part of the brand image that makes Taco Bell such an important part of their lives. Even the employees who worked at the hotel were trained in understanding what Taco Bell represents, what the brand is and what their approach is to hospitality. For the Salem campaign, remaining true to their brand allowed them to remain authentic to the, roughly, million visitors annually who look forward to the celebrations of history and the coastal benefits. Salem, much to their consumers’ pleasure, embraces the ageless brand of their grim past with four weeks of Halloween celebrations and special events that come with their campaign.

This Taco Bell campaign built up a connection between the consumers, who were at the actual hotel, as well as those watching via social media, who saw that the passion behind what the brand was doing. The audience felt valued by a brand that created an experience for them on such a large scale. In the case of Salem and on an even larger scale, the aspect of reliability and inclusion in regard to the campaign is what brought the target audience continuously back around to the destination ever year. The uniquely developed packages and itineraries create a special experience for a variety of communities despite their background. LGBT groups, culinary groups, family trips and many more are catered to in order to allow them to feel a connection to the vacation spot and prompt them to return. Taco Bell also excelled in creating this connection with the customers and prompted them to continue to trust the brand. “We’re really trying to make it a fan experience,” said Julie Felss Masino, Taco Bell U.S. president. The whole idea of connecting through hospitality kept the brand valued in the eyes of the consumer.

Point 4: Select a media outlet that fits the nature of the campaign.

When dealing with a campaign, media relations is important in order to reach the right audience. A broad outlet can cause the campaign details to get lost and not have the same impact on the people who they really effects. A targeted media outlet **creates a specialized audience, a detailed look at what is important throughout the campaign and finds channels for faster information spread.** A specialized audience gives the brand a chance to say what they want to who they want. This being done through a targeted media outlet makes it much easier for the brand image and goals to be clear to the consumer. The importance of a detailed look at the campaign is to properly convey the full message of the brand to the target audience. A weak look into the campaign will cause a lot of the brand’s goals to be diluted. Also, with a targeted media outlet, the information is going to reach the desired audience much faster and be spread from there at a rate that is efficient and effective.

Taco Bell primarily used social media and short video platforms to spread the news and details of the campaign to the public. By developing a short teaser video for The Bell hotel to be released on Facebook and Instagram, the audience was quickly developing into the internet savvy millennial and generation-Z. These teasers paired with influencers and pop-culture websites, detailing the internal experience, allowed the audience to share the niche videos on their social media, generating millions of dollars in free advertising. The AWAY campaign for

Go RVing applies for this point as well; the campaign is centered around reaching a diverse and involved audience of RV-ers. With a set of three TV spots featuring ethnically diverse families and a plethora of RV types and locations, the campaign is able to target a specialized audience of passionate outdoorsmen, travelers and families.

The detailed look into The Bell provided by firsthand videos from influencers allowed the campaign to be more authentic and connected to the audience who could not be there to experience it. The praises sung by Jeffree Star on YouTube about the taco gift bags and themed wall décor were loudly displayed through his bite-sized media outlet. Although the RV campaign may not have had influencers pumping out information, they did have detailed one-third column page ads that used a QR code to allow consumers to visit GoRVing.com in order to “find nearby RV dealers, locate a campground, watch free videos and more.” This access immediately allows the consumers to find the important details of the campaign and understand what the RV lifestyle is without feeling like too much of a hassle.

The short Taco Bell buzz videos allowed the whole experience to be shared to millions of people with a click of a button. This was much easier to spread the campaign than creating an article or producing their own manufactured news video. The RV campaign also shared Taco Bell’s thirst for a fast spread of data. The QR code media channel for the Go RVing allowed the company to access personal data quickly and at a peak time of activity. This form of media channel provides the valuable nature of data-mining in order to spread demographic info much faster to the company rather than settling for solely non-interactive print ads or television ads.

Overall, the Taco Bell “The Bell” campaign was a great example of using successful public relations to create a more holistic view of the company. The company not only played to their strengths, but they also acted as a great example for growing brands going forward.

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