



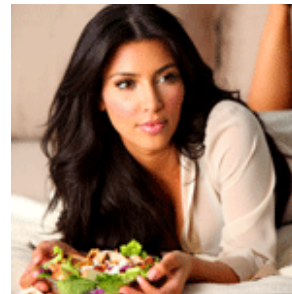
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Sexy better-for-you strategy working for Carl's Jr.

by [Christopher Hall](#) * • 13 Jan 2010

Better-for-you is a common enough marketing angle every January as consumers turn to dieting for the new year. But this year, it seems to be the ad strategy of choice for quick-service brands, with chains such as Carl's Jr. and Taco Bell touting their healthier offerings.



While better-for-you is one of the top trends the National Restaurant Association has predicted for 2010, for QSRs the strategy is less about trends and more about grabbing market share.

Taco Bell president Greg Creed said in the annual investor update, that the company was deliberately focusing on better-for-you offerings to boost its image with consumers in that category. And Andrew Puzder, CEO of Carl's Jr. parent company CKE Restaurants Inc., told investors on the company's last quarterly earnings call that healthful menu choices would be an important component in its strategy to bring same-store sales back into the positive.

Carl's Jr. hit first, launching its new premium entrée salads Dec. 16 with sexy ads featuring reality TV star Kim Kardashian. Taco Bell launched its Drive-Thru Diet campaign, highlighting its existing better-for-you Fresco menu line, Dec. 29 with a real-life customer spokeswoman.

Both campaigns appear to be targeting women, although there are components in each that no doubt appeal to the chains' target demographic of 18-to 34-year-old males. But are these campaigns resonating with consumers? If media impressions and online buzz are indicators, Carl's Jr.'s campaign certainly is.

According to Carl's Jr., through Jan. 8, interest in Kardashian's salad commercial had received 258 million media impressions. That's more than three times the quantity achieved by any one of the chain's previous celebrity commercial stars — including Padma Lakshmi and Paris Hilton among others — and more than all of them combined.

The YouTube post of the salad commercial has garnered nearly 1.9 million views, landing it on Visible Measures viral video chart in the No. 2 spot for the week of Jan. 4. In contrast, Taco Bell's Drive-Thru Diet infomercial has received slightly more than 6,000 views on its YouTube channel. Its YouTube post of the TV ad has garnered more than 45,000 views.

Online buzz is more positive for the Carl's Jr. campaign too, according to digital

marketing agency Zeta Interactive. It's Zeta Buzz tool mines the online media to determine the buzz about a given subject. Zeta Buzz has found that both brands saw increased buzz from the time of their campaign launches.

Carl's Jr.'s overall buzz went up 59 percent since the launch of the salad promotion campaign while the brand's tonal ranking increased as well. In the period since the salad promo launched, the chain's buzz has increased to 84 percent positive — a 10 percent positive tone increase in just under a one-month period, according to Zeta Buzz data.

Taco Bell, which has drawn scorn from nutritionists for labeling its campaign a diet, saw its buzz go up 44 percent since the launch of its campaign. But the tone was much more negative, dropping 6 percent to only a 67 percent positive tone.

Dual-demographic strategy

Sales of the Carl Jr. salads are positive too, said Brad Haley, executive vice president of marketing for Carl's Jr. and Hardee's restaurants. He attributes their success to both the product and the campaign.

The new products themselves and the use of Kardashian as a spokesperson is speaking to both men and women. More women without a doubt, but we're seeing a lot of men buy our salads," he said.

The salads are performing better now in their wider introduction than they did in test, which is a testament to both the combination of the Kardashian-themed advertising and to the mindset of consumers post-holidays, Haley said.

Haley said that including women in its target audience on this campaign is an important component of its success, but it's not a new strategy. While the chain is known for its sexy burger commercials, the chain has a longstanding trend of occasionally broadening its marketing focus and food offerings to strategically target women — whether salads or charbroiled chicken sandwiches.

"We have always periodically done so," Haley said. "Our focus remains on young hungry guys and big delicious burgers, but once every 12 to 24 months or so, we'll have a program or a promotion specifically geared to our women customers."

Haley also pointed out that nearly half of the Carl's Jr. customer base is women, because it's not just guys who want premium burgers. Both young men and young women poll as preferring a burger and fries for their quick meal choices, he said.

Despite that data, fewer women were actually buying the burgers, Puzder told investors on the company's latest quarterly earnings call — thus, the healthful items component of its strategy.

Carl's Jr. is seeing salad sales go to about 60-65 percent women, and 35-40 percent men, but it varies by the kind of salad, Haley said. The Cranberry Walnut Salad sells more to women, and the somewhat heartier Southwest Chicken Salad appeals more to men.

Kardashian helps with her dual-gender appeal, Haley said. Men find her beautiful and women find her fascinating, not only because of her celebrity status but because they can relate to her as a woman who isn't a waif-thin model who's publicly talked about her battles with weight.

"Kim is someone that appeals to both men and women as we hope our salads will," Haley said.

Branding success

That dual-demographic strategy can have a positive impact on branding, said marketing expert Peter Geisheker, CEO of The Geisheker Group Marketing Firm, as long as the celebrity is believable.

"Using celebrities to target both young men and young women can be smart as long as the celebrity is popular and believable among both young men and women," he said. "Do both men and women view the celebrity as somebody 'cool' that they admire?"

Geisheker also suggests it's wise to use a celebrity that the public believes might actually eat at that restaurant, and in this case Kardashian might more closely fit that bill than previous Carl's Jr. ad celebrities like Lakshmi or Hilton.

Denise Lee Yohn, brand as business consulting partner and owner of Denise Lee Yohn Inc., disagrees. She said the new campaign is a schizophrenic brand move, especially since the "overly sexual theme of the ad is clearly an appeal to men."

"Carl's Jr. has carved out a distinctive brand position with offerings and advertising squarely targeted to young males," she said. "Many of their past communications seem intentionally alienating to the female market — e.g., Paris Hilton car wash, mechanical bull rider, etc. — and they've experienced a great deal of success with this approach. To now switch gears and try to also target women just doesn't make sense."

* *Christa Hoyland contributed to this story.*

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