



2013's 7 Best Brand Stories

My year-end top brand stories recap was well received last year, and I decided to do it again. I'll break from my usual Q&A format to recap this year's most important brand developments in fast food.

Taco Bell. Taco Bell continued to ride the wave it created last year with Doritos Locos Tacos by firing up both the product and the marketing innovation cylinders in 2013. It started in March with the much-anticipated rollout of Cool Ranch Doritos Locos Tacos. Although restaurants ran out of product on the special "Fan Day" planned to reward social media followers with a preview of the product the day before it officially launched, the introduction turned out to be the most successful in Taco Bell's history. For the third iteration of the popular new product, the company teased the public about its flavor for weeks to build anticipation, simply saying it would bring "mas heat." Then it invited VidCon attendees to create video content to introduce the new product and ended up selecting 65 different video ads to run online, promoting the Flamas flavor.

Smashburger. Smashburger, the better-burger chain with more than 230 units, led the fast-casual segment's continued invasion into quick-serve territory. In June, to increase brand awareness, it launched its biggest marketing campaign yet, including TV spots. While most fast-casual chains don't have the market penetration or the marketing budgets to make TV advertising a part of their media mix, the execs at Smashburger felt the brand had reached the tipping point. They also wanted to use visual motion media to convey the smashing process that differentiates Smashburger's taste from rivals, a growing group that includes Five Guys, Shake Shack, and The Counter.

McDonald's. In April, McDonald's launched the McWrap, referring to it internally as a "Subway buster" and planning for it to be the biggest product launch of the year. The venerable fast feeder explained that the new product was an attempt to attract more Millennial consumers who value choice and customization. It's unclear whether or not the McWrap achieved the desired result, and sales for the chain in the U.S. remain close to flat. But, given the operational hurdles (including adding a new ingredient) and franchise resistance (due to concerns over price promotion) that the company had to clear before launching the new product, the effort is noteworthy.

KFC. KFC makes it on this list of top brand stories because it didn't have one. It certainly tried. The launch of Original Recipe boneless chicken in April touted the product as "transformational." The introduction centered on ads directed by a celebrity film

director and featuring a new tagline: "I ate the bones." The company expected the line to become a pop-culture catchphrase and the product to make "one of the great American turnaround stories." Company execs were probably the only ones who were surprised when neither happened. The story here is that a single product and a traditional advertising campaign can't undo years of marginal brand relevance.

Chipotle Mexican Grill. Chipotle stirred the sustainable food pot again this year, this time using a scarecrow to raise the public consciousness about processed food. In September, it introduced an animated short film with a haunting soundtrack about a scarecrow who navigates a dystopian setting to bring wholesome food back to people. The film drove traffic to an arcade-style adventure mobile game in which players could earn food rewards. The effort was criticized for being depressing and disingenuous, but it represented a new way of engaging people with the Chipotle brand and its values.

Starbucks. The big story about Starbucks in 2013 could have been the introduction of its La Boulange bakery products. It could also have been the chain's test of Evolution Fresh smoothies and juice in San Diego and Baltimore locations this fall. It might even have been the expansion of Starbucks Evenings, a program in which it offers beer, wine, and small appetizer plates to attract more nighttime traffic. But the real big story for the chain this past year is its drive-thru push. Earlier in the year, Starbucks announced its goal to build a drive-thru window into 60 percent of its system in the next five years. And it continues to fashion innovative drive-thru units out of reclaimed containers, including ones that offer no walk-up service. This strategy, combined with Starbucks's efforts to improve its food offerings, means other quick serves may start losing even more share to the 800-pound gorilla in the category that Starbucks has become.

Panera Bread. "Live Consciously. Eat Deliciously." was Panera's entry in the big brand story list. The marketing campaign, which spanned a variety of media—including national cable and local television, online, social media, and print—and was supported by a 30 percent increase in spending over the last year seemed to borrow a page from Chipotle's playbook. Highlighting the company's values and philanthropy, the effort was designed to connect with consumers through shared values of community service and better-quality food. Given the effectiveness of these types of brand campaigns to differentiate the brand and depart from a costly price and promotion-oriented approach, I'm guessing we'll see more of them in 2014.

As we look to next year, please keep your questions coming! ☺