

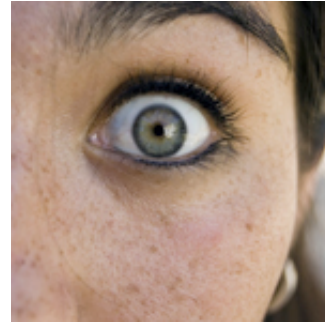
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## Are QSRs overusing sex as an advertising vehicle?

by [Christa Hoyland](#) \* • 17 Aug 2009

The brouhaha over quick-service brands' sexual-themed advertising has settled for now. But just as surely as new product releases are around the corner, so is the next campaign of titillating advertising. The past year has already seen its share, including:

- [Arby's Chicken Cordon Bleu campaign](#) equated the sandwich with foreplay
- A French-kissing couple promoted [Hardee's French Dip Thickburger](#)
- Burger King paired [SpongeBob with a new "Baby Got Back" remix](#)
- A bikini-clad [Audrina Patridge fawned over Carl's Jr.'s](#) latest Six Dollar Burger



Even fast casual brand Quiznos has jumped into the fray with an oven that talked suggestively to a Quiznos crew member about the chain's new Torpedo sandwiches.

The ads have received their share of criticism, some of it valid. For example, Burger King may have erred by marketing its SpongeBob Square Pants kids' meal with an adult-themed ad. Parents didn't buy the company's statement that the ad was meant for adults, with a toned down version showing up on children's programming.

Steamy ads certainly grab the attention of the target young adult male demographic. But the prevalence of such marketing has the mainstream media questioning whether they are a sign of desperation in a tight economy, with QSRs fighting for consumer dollars anyway they can.

QSRweb.com asked marketing experts for their take on whether this type of advertising drives sales, controversy or no. Here's what they had to say:

### Sometimes sex sells, well, just sex



*Commentary by Bob Taber, managing partner, strategic planning, for Thomas, Taber & Drazen, a full-service firm that specializes in strategic planning, marketing and media planning.*

If advertising's first task is to get attention and the target audience is young males, there are two ways to get them to notice. The first is sex. I've forgotten what the second is.

But seriously, **there is a relationship between food and sex.** The problem is some QSR advertisers fail to make that connection and are just using sex as an unrelated attention-getter, much like cheesecake calendars promoting plumbing tools.

Much has been studied and written about the connection between food and sex. There's the biological and anthropological connection that almost all species link courtship with eating. Provisioning – a male's willingness to provide food – indicates suitability as a mate. In some species, you *are* dinner after sex.

**There's a physiological connection.** Sex and food are physically linked in the limbic system of the brain, which controls emotional activity. It's nitric oxide, the proven "miracle molecule," for example, that opens blood vessels and gives flesh (like steak) its distinctive pink color. Hmmm.

**Then there are psychological parallels.** It's about stimulation where all our senses are heightened: guilt, self-pleasure, even identity. Are you a vegetarian, chocoholic or steak lover? A romantic, a flirt or adventuresome? This plays out in our fantasies, where we have about the same number a day for food as for sex. Well, maybe a few more about sex, sometimes food *and* sex.

Walt Disney inherently understood the connection. In *Lady and the Tramp* he sweetly captured that moment when food and sex come together over a shared string of spaghetti: mood music in the background; a romantically lit, semi-private table; attentive, but unobtrusive service and food worth sharing, reconnecting over.

Or more accurately, Brad Garrett in an episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, inhaling deeply over a smoldering grill full of steaks, exclaiming "How is this *not* cologne?" And who can forget the food/sex scenes from *Tom Jones*, *9½ Weeks* or *Like Water for Chocolate*?

But when sex is used merely to grab attention by the eyeballs, and isn't related to the food or occasion or brand, then it's just sex.

I wonder if those putting babes and burgers in ads would find it creative if the product were financial services, say. Heaven knows the connections between money and sex are legion.

## Sex Sells?! Not Really



*Commentary by Denise Lee Yohn, an independent brand as business consulting partner who has worked with clients like Jack In the Box, Burger King and Jamba Juice to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses.*

Sexually-themed advertising has been popping up among quite a few QSR chains these days, but a lot can go wrong with such an approach. Here's why:

**It's alienating.** Just as "shock jocks" like Howard Stern are entertaining and appealing to their primary target of young males but alienating to everyone else, "shock" advertising like Carl's Jr.'s explicit spots is considered offensive by many QSR customers. While young males might represent the heaviest users of the category, in these recessionary times chains can ill afford to turn-off other market segments.

**It's irresponsible.** Children are exposed to fast food advertising everywhere, despite what media schedules may profess. Spots with questionable content are doubtlessly seen, understood (or misunderstood), repeated and imitated by kids. The risqué spot Burger King aired to promote its SpongeBob Kids Meal was particularly careless, as the use of the popular kids' character surely caused the ad to surface on kids' radars

through unintended means.

**It's narrow-minded.** Savvy marketers understand that advertising is as much as a vehicle for promoting the brand to customers as it is a way to engage other brand stakeholders such as employees, franchisees, shareholders, recruits, etc. And while sexually-themed ads may not offend — and may even appeal to — some brand stakeholders, others are likely to be less tolerant. Why not use an approach which unifies and inspires your most important brand ambassadors?

**It's distracting.** Oftentimes the most memorable part of these ads is the sexual content — the brand, the product and the offer are completely overshadowed. Advertising should communicate key differentiators and reasons to buy. A brand like Quiznos that has a differentiating platform (i.e., toasting makes its subs taste better than Subway's) squanders opportunities to build its brand when it runs ads that focus on sexual innuendos by a sultry-voiced oven.

**It's becoming less effective.** There was a time when sex was a new approach for fast feeders. Now with Carl's Jr., Hardee's, Burger King, Arby's and Quiznos all using sexually-themed advertising — not to mention all the ads for other categories that use similar themes — it has become commonplace and no longer breaks through. Sex is losing its effectiveness as a means for QSRs to differentiate themselves.

With so many strikes against it, it doesn't make sense for QSRs to employ sexually themed ads. Plus, using sex to sell is the oldest trick in the book. For a category that prides itself on innovation and creativity, it seems QSRs could do better.

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