

Marketers Plan Giveaways for Covid-19 Vaccine Recipients

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By Nat Ives

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Krispy Kreme is offering free glazed doughnuts to patrons who produce Covid-19 vaccination cards.

Photo: Richard B. Levine/Zuma Press

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For more than a year, companies have tried to hone their advertising to reflect the different phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the U.S. undertakes the largest vaccination campaign in modern history, two companies are targeting the newly inoculated in what could be the start of the next phase of coronavirus marketing.

U.S. locations of Krispy Kreme Doughnut Corp. will give away a free glazed doughnut anytime someone flashes their Covid-19 vaccination card, and e-commerce rewards startup Drop promises \$50 in points to users who share vaccination selfies, as long as they use the hashtag #DropCovid and tag @JoinDrop.

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The marketing industry has reacted to the pandemic as it unfolded, starting when brands last spring pulled planned campaigns and replaced them with somber messages acknowledging the “uncertain times.” They later began cautious marketing pegged to the end of the initial lockdowns. By last month’s Super Bowl, Budweiser skipped its usual in-game commercial and promised to redirect the investment toward vaccine awareness.

Now come promotions for the vaccinated.

“We’re really looking forward to getting past Covid, and supporting people who are doing what they can to get us past that as a society by getting a shot when it’s their turn,” said Dave Skena, chief marketing officer at Krispy Kreme, part of JAB Holding Co.

Krispy Kreme said it hopes other companies make similar moves. “Marketers like me have the opportunity to do something to reach a broader audience in a way that is maybe somewhat commercial but also is just a good thing to do,” Mr. Skena said. “This is one of those situations where we’d love to be copied over and over again.”

The doughnut giveaway starts Monday and will run through the end of the year.

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Israel's Final Covid Vaccination Push: Live Music, Free Drinks

Israel is allowing vaccinated citizens to access gyms, restaurants and live concerts. As the country races to immunize all adults against Covid-19 and reopen fully, it is even offering free drinks and pizza to entice those who are hesitant to get the shot. Photo: Tamir Elterman

Incentives and rewards can help fight hesitancy among some people to get a Covid-19 vaccine, according to Derrick Fung, chief executive officer at Drop, whose promotion runs from April 2 through roughly the end of May. “We believe that brands across industries need to go beyond vaccine education and awareness and take a more active role to help accelerate Covid vaccinations,” he said.

It isn't a trend yet.

Lyft Inc. and Uber Technologies Inc. have announced initiatives to provide free or discounted transportation to vaccination centers, for example, but aren't offering promotions to people who are already vaccinated, they said. “We've been focused on helping ensure people don't lose their chance at getting a vaccine because they lack transportation,” an Uber spokesman said.

Starbucks Corp., which offered free coffee to front-line responders and healthcare workers at points last year during the pandemic, has lent assistance with other companies to Washington state's vaccination drive, and is paying employees for their time while they are getting vaccinations. It isn't offering free coffee or other incentives to vaccinated customers, however, the company said.

Observers differ on the wisdom of the new promotions.

Promotions for vaccinated people are a flawed tactic for both brand-building and public health, said Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership consultant and author of books including “What Great Brands Do.”

“Brands may gain exposure from whatever buzz they may create from their promotions, but they risk being perceived as opportunist or even exploitative, and they are unlikely to see any lasting lift in business,” Ms. Yohn said. “Brands that run these campaigns are favoring short-term news making over long-term brand-building.”

But Tae Wan Kim, associate professor of business ethics at Carnegie Mellon University’s Tepper School of Business, said such promotions are a win for brands and for fighting Covid-19. Consumers increasingly want to see companies doing good in addition to making profits, he said, comparing promotions for vaccinated people to giveaways for people wearing “I Voted” stickers.

Success will depend on the execution, however, Prof. Kim said. “Any marketing that weakens the graveness of the issue would better not go this way,” he said.

Mr. Skena said Krispy Kreme’s free doughnuts for vaccinated people continue the company’s efforts to connect with customers during a difficult time. It has given away doughnuts to healthcare workers, teachers and others, he said, noting that the company couldn’t manufacture masks or respirators as some others did. Krispy Kreme also plans to deliver free doughnuts to some vaccination centers and is giving employees up to four hours of paid time off to get vaccinated.

“It’s not about a single promotion,” Mr. Skena said.

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