

# Q&A: How Pizza Hut approaches its global partnerships to meet consumer needs

Article



Over the past few years, amid a huge digital transformation, Pizza Hut has had to pivot from traditional restaurant service and carryout to ecommerce.



In addition to its shift toward digital, another key area of focus for the company has been its global partnerships with brands like Unilever's Ben & Jerry's. We recently spoke with Courtney Vogel, vice president of marketing and strategic partnerships at Pizza Hut, about these partnerships and how they vary across markets.

**Tell us about your role at Pizza Hut.**

I joined the company at the end of 2017. Before, I worked for Sears, managing their digital marketing channels. Historically, Pizza Hut has been more of a traditional brand, and given the transformation of the consumer and the industry, the company knew it was time to start focusing on digital. I came over to do that. We built a phenomenal team and brought in a ton of new digital and performance marketing capabilities. We set off on this path to really redefine what we wanted our strategy to be.

I spent the first two years focusing primarily on digital and our media evolution. After that, I started to take on some of our brand work, trying to understand who we are, the identity that we want to have with our consumers, and how we want to position ourselves in the international space. (Pizza Hut International handles all of our markets outside of the US.)

Most recently, I've taken on the role of vice president of marketing and strategic partnerships. And what that really means is doing a lot of the work that we already kicked off in digital and brand, but also adding this focus on strategic partners and how we can grow new sales layers within our business. Whether that be ice cream delivery with Unilever or filling a plant-based need with our recent partnership with Beyond Meat, we want to make sure that we're keeping up with the change in consumer trends and demand.

**Tell us about the work Pizza Hut is doing with its partnerships.**

When we look at our core menu, we evaluate first what the competition is doing, but also where the additional consumer entry points are. We first identify the consumer need, and then we start to evaluate the various partners that can fill that role.

We love the partnership that we kicked off with Unilever. Obviously, it's a massive global brand, but specifically when we looked at Ben & Jerry's—one of the brands that Unilever owns—it's a great example to follow, because it's been a prevalent force in social purpose work and social injustice. We're on that same journey as a brand. How do we give back to our community? That synergy just makes the dynamic even stronger. It takes it beyond sales.

The other thing we're doing right now is taking a look at additional consumer trends—whether that's brand collaborations or just leaning into a specific food category, like wings—and seeing which partners are out there to help us create something distinctive for our consumer.

### **Can you speak in more detail about the Ben & Jerry's partnership and what that looked like?**

We signed our global agreement with Unilever within the past year or so. We had a bold goal to get ice cream delivery in most of our big markets around the world. We went with delivery specifically because we realized there's a consumer need and, of course, the perfect pairing of ice cream and pizza. We're in more than 20 markets around the world, with a ton more slated to go into pilot this year. I think our [endgame] is to create a Pizza Hut-brand ice cream flavor, something really unique that makes it distinctive to us.

### **How do your partnerships vary across markets?**

We look at our partnerships at a global level because we want all of the scale and the camaraderie that comes with big global brands working together. We do our best to identify strategy and launch plans that we know work. For example, we know that in the UK, when we bundle one of our key promotions with a free pint of ice cream, it'll drive a huge lift in additional sales. We build the initial strategy upfront: Here's what we want to go after, and here's why we think it's going to benefit the business from a sales and profits standpoint.

### **How are you getting the word out about these partnerships? Are you primarily using social media?**

A big pivot in how we've done brand marketing over the past two years has been this idea that we can take a global campaign idea and build enough assets and content that each of our individual markets can use them in their own local way.

Last October, we launched our first global campaign around our pan pizza—it was its 40th anniversary. We had a big excuse, given the anniversary, to say, "Let's get as many markets as we can to participate in the campaign," which would obviously generate more media and buzz, but also more awareness of the brand. What we do when we build these campaigns is design a set of assets that can be used on several different social channels. Whether that's launching a TikTok campaign that can be picked up globally by different markets or it's creating specific Reels. We had an Instagram filter of pizza falling from the sky, and it was great because you would see it live and in multiple markets around the world. The use of the platforms seems to really cascade well, especially when it's at a global level.

## **How do you figure out the touchpoints that you want to hit when it comes to reaching your consumers, especially when you have to adjust around a pandemic—a time when consumer behaviors are constantly changing and evolving?**

We're constantly doing research and consumer analysis on how behaviors are shifting and what we should expect in the upcoming months and years. But as COVID-19 hit, we went from having a pretty good view of the next three to five years to a completely different forecast—and something that absolutely changed our business strategy in general.

When I think about some of the changes that directly impacted us, ensuring trust and safety was at the forefront. We're a large brand, but the level of safety and precautions the consumers required was elevated quite a bit. So, we had to quickly pivot, launching things like our contactless delivery services—and doing that across a hundred markets in a couple of weeks or months is a big feat.

## **What did you learn from adapting to pandemic times?**

We use this phrase internally: "digitize or die." That means the only brands that will survive both in the pandemic and post-pandemic are ones willing to support digital, support delivery, and, honestly, use data to make all of their decisions. That was something that we were moving toward over the next five years. But with the pandemic, we realized that those things had to be the most critical priorities in our business. Although we still have a lot of dine-in assets within our system, we know that everything needs to be shifted or built to handle delivery, curbside, accessible takeaway, etc.

Two years ago, one of our markets introduced a new brand story, which was "Now That's Delivering." And we had introduced this with the intention of building awareness that we are a delivery brand and want to be a delivery-first brand. During the pandemic, we realized the more markets we launched in with that type of message, the more it resonated with consumers, and you could see it in the numbers.

## **What's next for Pizza Hut?**

From a digital standpoint, we know we still have a long way to go to meet our consumers' needs. Our app has to be best in class. When customers open our app, they need to feel like they're getting a personal experience. We need to show them the product they want and know enough about them to make the entire consumer journey flawless. So, the app will be a big thing.

Additionally, we're really hopeful that a lot of the partnerships that we've introduced in the past year, like with Beyond Meat, really scale. From what we've tested with Beyond Meat, it's been a phenomenal addition to our menu, driving incremental sales in the markets where it has been introduced. Our hope is to continue building and designing Pizza Hut proprietary Beyond products that create an offering for everyone in the world, whether you're a plant-based, no-meat eater or not. We're excited to play into some of those bigger spaces that are nontraditional.

In the next 12 to 18 months, you should really feel the brand becoming more and more modern across the world. We will make sure that we're available and accessible to consumers in all age groups, whether that's the young consumers on TikTok or our older segment of consumers. We feel like we're in a pivotal time with the brand. We've said internally—and I'm comfortable saying out loud—that 2021 will be our brand-defining year. We definitely have the team around the world to do it.