

How the pandemic changed marketing for McDonald's

Article

For one of the world's largest restaurant chains, the pandemic changed everything. Indoor dining was closed. Lockdowns shut down traffic. But it wasn't just operationally: McDonald's was just starting to work with a new agency, Wieden + Kennedy, when the US felt the COVID-19 crush. It turns out, this was a blessing in disguise.

“We changed the way we went to market,” Jennifer Healan, vice president, US marketing, brand content, and engagement at McDonald’s, said in a session this week at The Brief, a Marketing Brew event in New York City. “In the past, McDonald’s had been living in this short-term transactional marketing environment, and they’re chasing a limited time offer that went month to month. March 2020 changed all that.”

Here's how the iconic brand pivoted from transactional marketing to brand-building in the long term:

Focus on your fans. Healan said the chain uses “fans” instead of “consumers” or “customers.” “The haters will always hate,” she said. “We stopped focusing on the haters.” Instead, McDonald’s turned to those who said “I’m lovin’ it” and created a book of “fan truths.”

One example is “the golden lights of midnight salvation,” meaning you’ve come out of the club and need a bite to eat. But even that truth shifted in the pandemic. “If you see our lights on, it means we are open, which was an uncertain thing at that time [because so many places were closed],” said Brandon Pracht, managing director, McDonald’s Global at Wieden + Kennedy.

Turn to your community. In the early pandemic days, this focus on fans meant first responders. McDonald’s was far from the only brand to do this but the chain made sure to draw back to its marketing plan. The brand found photos of first responders at McDonald’s as children and incorporated that into a TV spot. The chain also gave out 12 million free meals to healthcare workers and first responders.

Tap into celebrity. But not just any celebrity—make sure they’re fans. “Everyone has [a McDonald’s order] and it’s not a generic thing,” Pracht said. Is it a Sprite with fries that you dip in barbeque sauce? That’s part of McDonald’s partner Travis Scott’s order. After the Scott spot was released, fans began [ordering by playing his music in the drive-thru](#), which Pracht said employees knew immediately what the customers were asking for.

Humanize your social media account. Healan says fans always reach out asking when a fan-favorite like the McRib will be back on the menu. The brand [poked fun by tweeting](#), “it’s always ‘when is the McRib coming back’ and never ‘how are you doing person who runs the McDonald’s account.’”

Where the ad budget goes: As it shifts to brand-building, McDonald’s was the No. 1 spender at \$69.5 million in out-of-home advertising in 2021, according to data from the Out of Home Advertising Association of America and Kantar Media. It also ranked No. 9 in the top 20 for

aired radio ad spots in the US during the first half of 2022, according to Media Monitors. McDonald's was the No. 1 restaurant brand, joined only by Wendy's, in the top 20.

Top 20 US Radio Advertisers, Ranked by Number of Ad Spots Aired, H1 2022

1. Indeed	1,668,800
2. Progressive	1,255,243
3. Upside	1,144,570
4. ZipRecruiter	934,732
5. Babbel	931,325
6. AutoZone	609,486
7. DuckDuckGo	600,251
8. The Home Depot	596,076
9. McDonald's	573,265
10. Macy's	571,206
11. eBay	555,349
12. Straight Talk	554,695
13. Geico	546,753
14. Wendy's	507,640
15. QC Kinetix	505,589
16. Liberty Mutual	504,834
17. Lowe's	502,286
18. Allstate	492,466
19. State Farm Insurance	482,040
20. Capital One	466,950

Note: AM/FM only; across 100 US markets tracked by Media Monitors, broader industry metrics may vary

Source: Media Monitors as cited by Inside Radio, July 8, 2022

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