

The Impossible Whopper: A Burger King Campaign Case Study

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PRL 425: Public Relations Cases and Campaigns

November 3, 2021

Word Count: 3470

Research/Diagnosis

The Burger King Corporation specializes in fast flame-broiled hamburgers, holding the title of second-largest hamburger chain in the United States after McDonald's. Americans consume more meat than almost any other country in the world, but as of the last five years, consumers have shifted their eating focus to better plant-based alternatives¹.

The fast-food chain has sold a Veggie Whopper since 2002 with limited success but never intended to replace the taste and experience of eating meat. Through audience testing with Nielsen, Burger King discovered that 39% of Americans are actively trying to incorporate more plant-based foods into their diets². Using this key audience information, Burger King partnered with the start-up Impossible Foods to create a meatless Whopper that still tasted like real meat. This collaboration signaled the biggest breakthrough for fake meat into the restaurant industry to date, and Burger King launched its Impossible Whopper Twitter campaign on April 1, 2019³.

The company kicked off the campaign starting with 59 St. Louis restaurants. After a short trial period where the launch "exceeded expectations" according to executives, the company announced plans for a nationwide rollout. Burger King expanded the Impossible Whopper across all of its 7,000 U.S. outlets on August 8, and most recently in March of 2021, it extended across all of Canada. The plant-based Whopper is now available in more than 25 countries worldwide and continues to exceed expectations, drive traffic to our restaurants and attract new incremental guests," Chris Finazzo, the president of Burger King North America, said⁴. Burger King rivals like Red Robin and White Castle have also teamed with Impossible Foods to produce meatless options for its customers, while chains like Carl's Jr., Bareburger, Qdoba and Del Taco use Beyond Meat's plant-based products⁵. Despite the increase in competition, in September 2019, impossible burgers by Impossible Foods became the #1 item sold in grocery stores due to the partnership with Burger King⁶.

According to Suzy, consumers are more likely to learn about healthy food trends from social media than from traditional marketing tactics. Burger King's announcement of the Impossible Whopper on April Fool's Day was no marketing mistake. In fact, the company planned for a date where social media users are already more engaged and where the company can achieve a higher return on investment (ROI). Burger King utilized key marketing tools of taking note of trends, aligning with customer values based on research and using the element of surprise. Fans on social media scrambled to discover if the Impossible Whopper was legitimate for a company historically immersed in serving beef products. While the Impossible Whopper was a meatless alternative for customers, the company's digital strategy centered around meat-eaters at the restaurants. Burger King took initiatives to show customers the idea that a plant-based burger could taste like beef. The Impossible Burger uses 75% less water, generates

¹ Social Factor. 2020. "Burger King Turned the "Impossible" into Social Media Gold." Social Factor.

² Schuman, Nicole. 2019. "Burger King's Impossible Feat: Determining an Audience Strategy." PR News.

³ Social Factor. 2020. "Burger King Turned the "Impossible"

⁴ Castrodale, Jelisa. 2020. "Burger King Lowers Price of Impossible Whopper." Food & Wine.

⁵ "Burger King mascot streams with esports stars to promote Impossible Whopper." 2019. Marketing Dive.

⁶ Social Factor. 2020. "Burger King Turned the "Impossible"

87% fewer greenhouse gases, and requires 95% less land than a conventional burger. It has the same protein and iron as beef, without antibiotics, hormones or artificial flavors⁷. The environment and sustainability play a part in 33% of U.S. consumer food choices. Once Burger King accelerated its campaign with news of the Impossible Whopper Tour, fans scrambled to see where the burger would drop next⁸. Key stakeholders for the duration of the campaign included the target audiences, the Burger King customer base, decision-making executives, competitors, Impossible Foods and Burger King employees.

Objectives

Burger King looked to accomplish a few objectives with this campaign. First, they wanted to offer an additional alternative to meat-based products to include vegetarian and vegan eaters at their restaurants. The company saw the opportunity to take advantage of restaurant eaters with dietary restrictions or certain styles of eating with the addition of this new product. The main objective, however, was to educate the public on how similar plant-based alternatives taste in comparison to real meat products. It aimed to take the burger beyond its perceived fringe foodie territory and into a mainstream product for all eaters to enjoy. Overall, Burger King was looking to target an audience of meat-eaters looking for lighter food options, looking to make a switch to plant-based alternatives, or trying to support the environment through food choices.

Burger King's SMART objectives include increasing position opinion of plant-based alternatives compared to real meat among restaurant eaters, increasing Impossible Whoppers sold among meat-eaters over the course of the six month trial period, and increasing awareness of plant-based alternatives to meat in support of sustainability and the environment over the six month trial period.

Strategies

Burger King looked at its objectives of increasing positive opinion, creating awareness and converting to sales to guide its campaign strategy.

To effectively communicate to customers the change, BK created the tagline "100 percent Whopper, 0 percent beef" to include on all promotional materials and packaging⁹. They brainstormed ideas to design a clever way to subvert expectations of vegan burgers from the stigma surrounding plant-based foods. They ensured their campaign emphasized that while BK already offers vegetarian options, the Impossible Burger is designed to taste, look and smell like real beef¹⁰. Lastly, they recognized the significance of attracting a younger audience to support the launch of this product who already purchase plant-based products and place high importance on the quality of ingredients of food. By using social media, Burger King was able to push the

⁷ Cornwell, Doug. n.d. "Impossible Foods is Doing the Impossible." Barnum Mechanical Inc.

⁸ Social Factor. 2020. "Burger King Turned the "Impossible"

⁹ Fleming, Molly. 2019. "Burger King showed brands can use April Fools for more than dodgy hoaxes." MarketingWeek.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Impossible Burger to a younger, more health-conscious audience. The public relations and marketing team planned to create content showing the similarities in taste, texture and smell between the Impossible Burger and the meat Whopper.

Tactics

Paid and Owned

Burger King used the recognition of its brand and existing owned media to help promote this new product as part of the company's extensive product line. While fans scanned social media for places to buy the new Impossible Burger after its initial St. Louis launch, BK decorated an existing BK to look like an "Impossible Restaurant" and invited customers to its "grand opening." When fans assembled outside the popup restaurant in New York City, BK revealed its logo and shared news of the Impossible Whopper nationwide release date¹¹. This promotion and the garnering of fan reactions made for excellent branded content that could be shared on the Burger King website and social media accounts. This constitutes paid media as well due to the planning behind holding this popup event and the gathering of media attention from various sources.

Earned

Launching the announcement of the Impossible Burger on April Fool's Day led to a burst of media interaction, engagement and speculation for the brand. Overall, it created attention in support of BK and garnered coverage from various media outlets and interaction with other brands on social media. It causes users to question the validity of the announcement and was on-brand for the chain that has previously attempted pranks on social media. Reports showed restaurant-goers approaching Burger King staff asking about the possibility of an Impossible Whopper and seeing if the item was included on the menu. Word-of-mouth marketing allowed the message to spread further beyond media outlets, social media and devoted BK customers.

Shared

As mentioned, Burger King knew the importance of using social media in its campaign to reach its intended audience. When the company launched the campaign on Twitter, it knew through data that approximately 33% of U.S. millennials were attempting to eat a better, plant-based diet¹². Because of this, rolling out the campaign on social media, specifically Twitter, allowed Burger King to connect with its main target demographic first before transitioning to other methods and mediums.

Partnerships with celebrities and beneficial companies have long played a role in the promotional strategy of Burger King, but the brand used limited outside personalities to help promote the new product. For the nationwide rollout of the Impossible Whopper, Burger King partnered with esports brand FaZe Clan to introduce a live-streamed promotion. While BK

¹¹ Stanley, T.L. 2019. "Burger King's Meatless Whopper Debuts on April 1, Turning Doubt Into a Marketing Tactic." AdWeek.

¹² Schuman, Nicole. 2019. "Burger King's Impossible Feat: Determining an Audience Strategy." PR News.

ramped up marketing for the plant-based Whopper, the FaZe Clan partnership allowed another avenue for the brand to target young, largely male audiences that favor esports and live streaming ¹³.

Owned and Shared

Burger King thought about commercial and social media materials that would be beneficial in informing customers how much the Impossible Whopper compared to real beef. The company conducted a taste test that fed the new sandwiches to regular customers without telling them the ingredients, titled “The Impossible Test.” In the video, customers share how much they love Burger King Whopper and how often they frequent the restaurants. Once it was revealed that there was no beef in the Whopper, the superfans were shocked at how this product could taste so similar to beef while being a plant-based product. Fans even shared they would consider eating more Impossible products due to the increased health benefits and effect on sustainability. The video was posted on YouTube and used as an ad spot on TV to promote the new product offering.

Owned and Paid

Burger King wanted to extend its promotional efforts outside of customers entering a BK restaurant. Through partnering with DoorDash, customers could receive a buy-one-get-one offer through the app. For \$7, customers could do a side-by-side taste test and comparison at home of the meatless and beef versions of the Whopper, further extending its objective to inform people about how similar plant-based and beef products can taste. Additionally, DoorDash waived the delivery fee for orders of the Impossible Whopper through September 1 after the nationwide August release to help the promotion of the product ¹⁴.

Implementation

_____Burger King debuted the Impossible Whopper on Twitter on April 1, 2019, which sparked immediate conversation and interest. By launching the Impossible Whopper campaign, Burger King hoped to educate the public on how similar plant-based alternatives taste in comparison to real meat products. Furthermore, Burger King wanted to increase positive opinion about plant-based meat alternatives, increase the number of Impossible Whoppers sold to meat-eaters, and increase awareness about the connection between plant-based foods and sustainability. It was extremely strategic that Burger King launched the Impossible Whopper campaign on April Fool’s Day because good timing is vital for the success of a public relations campaign. Social media users debated whether the Impossible Whopper was a prank or not. After sparking conversations online, Burger King launched the Impossible Whopper in 59 restaurants around the St. Louis area. Once Burger King realized that the Impossible Whopper

¹³ “Burger King mascot streams with esports stars to promote Impossible Whopper.” 2019. Marketing Dive.

¹⁴ Popper, Nathaniel. I. “Behold the Beefless ‘Impossible Whopper.’” New York Times.

was a huge success, it expanded the burger to over 7,000 Burger King locations in all 50 states in August 2019.

Reporting/Evaluation

Burger King identified the market opportunity available to include a plant-based product in its stores and analyzed its audience to uncover the best way to make this happen. They saw consumers were looking to cut back on meat, and found a way to satisfy that demand without the trade-offs that traditionally accompany vegetarian alternatives. The brand started a movement among fast-food companies to offer more environmentally-conscious food alternatives to meat and offer more inclusive offerings to those with dietary restrictions or allergies ¹⁵. After seeing the success of BK's campaign, White Castle partnered with Impossible food on a test basis and permanently added an Impossible Slider to its menu after sales proved the demand for the item.

Burger King saw the success of the launch through its sales and its ability to not take traffic away from customers ordering the regular Whopper burger. "We're not seeing guests swap the original Whopper for the Impossible Whooper," said José Cil, CEO of Burger King's parent company Restaurant Brands. "We're seeing that it's attracting new guests." Vegetarian or not, curious eaters are embracing the plant-based food trend. Burger King experienced an 18% boost in traffic and a 3.6% rise in overall sales ¹⁶. For a company that sees millions of dollars in sales a day, these are very good numbers. In the third quarter of 2019, BK sales rose 10% which they attribute to offering the Impossible Burger in all of their locations. Data analytics firm inMarket inSights reported that the BKs that were part of the Impossible trial outperformed the chain's national foot traffic average by 18.5 percent. By contrast, Burger King locations outside St. Louis saw their average foot traffic fall by 1.75 percent between March and April ¹⁷.

By using sustainability as a platform for product innovation, goals of sustainability were driven in return. The results of this campaign led to the creation of additional Impossible offerings. Burger King expects demand for plant-based options to grow and has begun expanding its vegan options outside the United States. The plant-based Rebel Whopper and Rebel Chicken King debuted in Sweden over the summer, and the company is looking into exciting plant-based options for Latin America and Asia ¹⁸. Additional items include The Impossible Whopper Jr. – a smaller version of the Whopper, The Impossible Burger featuring ketchup, mustard, and pickles on a sesame seed bun, The Impossible Cheeseburger with all the above ingredients plus dairy-based cheese and Impossible Nuggets.

As successful as the campaign was in educating meat-eaters about the benefits of plant-based alternatives, Burger King ran into issues with marketing the product as 0% beef. A class-action suit filed against BK claimed it engaged in "false and misleading business practices"

¹⁵ Popper, Nathaniel. 1. "Behold the Beefless 'Impossible Whopper.'"

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Castrodale, Jelisa. 2020. "Burger King Lowers Price"

¹⁸ Fleming, Molly. 2019. "Burger King showed brands"

by noting vegans would not purchase the Impossible patties if they knew they were prepared next to meat options ¹⁹. The plaintiff said he was “duped by Burger King’s deceptive practices into eating a meat-free Whopper patty that was covered in meat byproducts.” When this issue came to light with the vegan and vegetarian community, Burger King offered to grill the Impossible patties separately but only upon request from the customer.

Theories

Burger King followed two theories for the implementation of the Impossible Burger campaign. The Diffusion Theory focuses on the first people to try a new product or technology. Once Burger King discovered the demand for plant-based products within the food and beverage industry, it targeted these consumers to eventually attract late adopters. Once BK customers saw the hype and demand surrounding the Impossible Burger, they used the five criteria of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption to decide whether to either try the new product or continue ordering existing offerings.

Through developmental research, Burger King discovered 39% of Americans are actively trying to incorporate more plant-based foods into their diets. Using the Agenda Building Theory, they tried to advocate for plant-based alternatives, sustainability and eating for the environment. Burger King is famously known for its meat products, for example, the Whopper, but the company’s ability to advocate for alternatives made with plants attracted publicity from media organizations and on social media. Using the public and media attention, the company was able to support its agenda of spreading awareness about the sustainability benefits of eating more plant-based products and in turn sell more Impossible Whoppers.

Diversity and Inclusion First Approach

The thought of diversity was there with the rollout of this new product for an underserved target market in the food and beverage fast-food industry. However, Burger King ran into unexpected problems that could’ve been avoided had they dedicated more time to equity and inclusion efforts for the campaign. Just a week after the release of BK’s partnership with Impossible Foods, it pulled an advertisement after being accused of racism. In the ad, diners eat burgers with giant chopsticks, and social media erupted with users claiming the messaging mocked Asian culture. Others in the Asian community disagreed, commenting they did not find the advertisement as offensive as the social media sphere depicted ²⁰. Burger King immediately removed the clip and apologized for displaying the ad, a mistake that could’ve been avoided had more diverse staff been consulted during the decision-making process.

Due to Burger King’s lawsuit issues, the company could be seen as unethical for not fully explaining their cooking processes and ingredients for strict vegetarians or vegans. The company

¹⁹ Dahir, Abdi L. 2019. “Vegan Man Sues Burger King, Claiming It Cooks Impossible Whopper Next to Meat.” New York Times.

²⁰ TRT World. 2019. “Burger King slammed for ‘racist’ ad.” YouTube.

willingly sold products targeted at plant-based eaters knowing the mayonnaise included on the burger made the product non-vegan and that the patties were mixed in with meat products. The packaging included very small print on advertisements that states the burger may not be suitable for vegans and vegetarians because it was cooked alongside meat products, but the messaging was not clear enough or common knowledge for mistakes not to be made.

The pricing of the Impossible Whopper falls in line with similar plant-based fast-food offerings. The burger is only a dollar more expensive than the meat Whopper at \$5.50, meaning the price is accessible to multiple socioeconomic levels and all people who wish to try the plant-based alternative. In January of 2020, Burger King announced the Impossible Whopper would be included on its two-for-\$6 ²¹. The price change could be attributed to the dropoff in sales of the Impossible Whopper, or BK's attempt to make the product even more accessible with its customer base to truly counter the meat offers with the plant-based options.

Recommendations

Adjusting to circumstances or unanticipated changes plays a key part in any campaign. Additional research also needs to be conducted to shift strategies and tactics when these changes do occur. For the Impossible Whopper campaign, it was revealed that the Impossible Whopper was not actually vegan and vegetarian friendly since the burger was cooked on the same grill as regular Whoppers and other meat products. In November 2019, vegan Philip Williams sued Burger King because "the fast-food chain failed to disclose that its plant-based Impossible Whoppers are cooked on the same grills as beef products" ²². The plaintiff argued that Burger King's deceptive advertising convinced him to purchase an Impossible Whopper, and that if he had known the Impossible Whopper was cooked alongside meat products, then he never would have purchased it ²³. Vegans across the country argued that Burger King was promoting false and deceptive advertising by releasing the tagline "100% Whopper, 0% beef" and labeling the Impossible Whopper as "plant-based." This was a significant issue that Burger King did not anticipate when conducting research and creating strategies and tactics. When circumstances such as this one arise, companies must adapt and adjust components of the campaign. However, Burger King failed to do this. Burger King did not respond to the issue quickly and declined to comment, which made consumers even angrier. As a result, the number of Impossible Whoppers orders in an average day dropped from an already low 32 to 28 compared to the regular Burger King Whopper ordered 234 average times per day ²⁴. Burger King could have easily avoided this issue by directly and promptly addressing this situation, conducting additional research to better understand the consumers affected and leading with transparency with customers.

Based on this background knowledge, we recommend Burger King forgo advertising this product as vegetarian and vegan and instead focus on offering meat-eaters a plant-based

²¹ Castrodale, Jelisa. 2020. "Burger King Lowers Price"

²² Dahir, Abdi L. 2019. "Vegan Man Sues Burger King"

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mavericks, Joseph. 2020. "How Burger King Keeps Failing at Marketing." BetterMarketing.

alternative. If Burger King starts removing the mayonnaise and cooking the burgers in the oven compared to the grill, then they can ethically start marketing back to this niche audience. When the Impossible Whopper was first launched, Burger King should have immediately informed vegans and vegetarians that the burger would not be suited for them unless they requested a non-broiler method of preparation. The company also could have been more accommodating to vegans and vegetarians by including an Impossible Whopper that cooks separately and is served without mayo on the menu.

From a publicity perspective, Burger King could've taken more advantage of celebrity endorsement to promote their product. Many celebrities follow a plant-based lifestyle, and this product is the perfect opportunity to connect with influential people. Additionally, Burger King did little to push out the environmental and sustainability information they originally planned to do. Partnering with celebrities and influencers to spread an agenda surrounding plant-based food for the environment would've been the perfect opportunity and is a tactic that should be highly considered if Burger King launches additional plant-based options. Depending on which segment of the target market they were looking to penetrate, this could also influence who BK asks to promote the product. Based on the reaction of the community in regards to Burger King's diversity and inclusion mistakes during this campaign, leading on social media compared to traditional advertising and marketing is still the best option.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it ethical for Burger King to promote its product as vegetarian and vegan with the knowledge that this only applies with certain modifications? Whose responsibility is it to enforce this ethical concern?
2. How has the addition of more plant-based products impacted the fast-food industry? How has it influenced the food and beverage industry as a whole?
3. What was the positive impact Burger King created by launching this new product on April Fool's Day? Do you think this aspect of the campaign was successful?
4. How has Burger King redefined its image since the release of plant-based products?

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The Impossible Burger: Burger King Campaign Case Study

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Research

- Burger King, historically home to meaty fast-food like Whopper hamburgers, discovered more Americans wanting to incorporate plant-based foods into their diets
- BK partnered with Impossible Foods to create the Impossible Whopper, a meatless Whopper that tastes like the real thing.
- BK hoped to educate the public on how similar plant-based alternatives taste in comparison to real meat products and increase positive opinion about plant-based meat alternatives, especially within a younger more health-conscious demographic

Objectives

1. Increase positive opinion of plant-based alternatives compared to real meat among restaurant eaters
2. Increase Impossible Whopper sales among meat-eaters over the course of the six month trial period
3. Increase awareness of plant-based alternatives to meat in support of sustainability and the environment over the six month trial period

Strategies

- Created a tagline to include on all promotional materials and packaging
- Brainstorm a clever way to subvert expectations of vegan burgers from the stigma surrounding plant-based foods
- Recognized the significance of attracting a younger audience; emphasized that while BK already offers vegetarian options, the Impossible Burger is designed to taste, look and smell like real beef

Tactics

- Paid and Owned: Decorated an existing restaurant to look like an “Impossible Restaurant” in NYC; BK shared news of the Impossible Whopper launch and revealed its own logo
- Earned: Launching the announcement of the Impossible Burger on April Fool’s Day led to a burst of media interaction, engagement and speculation for the brand
- Shared: For the nationwide rollout of the Impossible Whopper, Burger King partnered with esports brand FaZe Clan to introduce a live streamed promotion

Implementation

- BK launched the Impossible Whopper campaign on Twitter on April 1, 2019, which sparked immediate conversation and interest. After exceeding expectations, the Whopper dropped in all BK locations across the U.S. by August 2019

Reporting/Evaluation

- Overall, Burger King saw the success of the launch through its sales and its ability to not take traffic away from customers ordering the regular Whopper burger

Recommendations

- More transparency with BK audience through all company communications
- Make ordering the Impossible Whopper more accessible to vegans/vegetarians
- Take advantage of celebrity stardom to promote the company’s plant-based products