

Soup-to-Nuts Podcast: What is the best way to reach consumers during and after the pandemic?

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29-Mar-2021 - Last updated on 29-Mar-2021 at 16:55 GMT



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The coronavirus outbreak fundamentally changed how food and beverage brands are connecting with consumers – from abruptly halting live sampling and in-store promotions to altering the types of messaging consumers want to hear.

Early in the pandemic the lack of promos, sampling and other marketing opportunities didn't pack much of a punch for established brands and companies already on shelf as their primary focus was on keeping stores stocked and the supply chain moving. But for new players and products, the marketing moratorium led to sometimes devastating losses.

Over time the impact on market share of restricted marketing became more pronounced for all players as consumer loyalty shifted to new brands that they tried for lack of options during stockouts or legacy brands they knew and trusted.

In this episode of [FoodNavigator-USA's Soup-To-Nuts podcast](#), marketing executives with Casper's Ice Cream share how their approach to advertising and consumer engagement has evolved during the pandemic – including some surprising traction with old school tactics, tips for working with micro-influencers and how to safely and effectively leverage events and sponsorships when large gatherings are off the table but consumers still crave connections and hope for a brighter future. The company also shares its approach for relaunching a boutique brand after the coronavirus outbreak forced it to pull back the initial debut last year – a story all too familiar for many industry newcomers and new products looking to breakout in 2020.

Pandemic is a double-edge sword with sales up, but SKU diversity down

According to data from Chicago-based market research firm IRI, dollar sales of ice cream and sherbet soared 13.4% to \$6.8 billion, while sales of frozen novelties, like the ice cream sandwiches and cones made by Casper's, climbed even higher with a 16% increase to \$5.7 billion during the pandemic for the 52 weeks ending Sept. 6, 2020.

As Casper's Ice Cream's VP of marketing & sales Keith Lawes explains much of this growth was fueled by people seeking comfort and fun from products like Casper's Fat Boy ice cream sandwiches or Jolly Llama gluten- and dairy-free cones, while still staying safe during the pandemic.

"Novelties really seemed to take off," in part because consumers perceived them as safer because they were individually wrapped and could be enjoyed with others without sharing and increasing exposure risks, Lawes said.

While the pandemic lifted sales of Casper's Fat Boy and Jolly Llama branded products that were already in distribution, Lawes explained it negatively impacted the launch of Casper's new line of boutique-style novelties branded as Churn Baby.

He explains Churn Baby was set to launch just as the pandemic began and many retailers skipped resets or opted not to bring in new products. This left the company with a lot of inventory and limited options for distribution.

Despite the false start and the ongoing SKU rationalization that many retailers initiated early in the pandemic and have yet to fully let up, Casper's is preparing to relaunch Churn Baby this spring.

Joaby Parker, president of Cover3 Creative and fractional chief marketing officer for Casper's Ice Cream explains that the new line is niche and innovative enough that he believes it will meet retailers' higher innovation bar for new products and increase basket ring by reaching a set of consumers currently underserved.

"Churn Baby is actually following the trend of boutique ice cream shops, and we felt there was a great demand and a great growth in boutique ice cream shops all around the country," he said.

As such, the brand included a “brand new innovation in the ice cream world, which is what we call a cookie cup,” Parker said. *“It’s a small little cup of ice cream, but there’s an entire cookie on top of it. So, you actually have to dig through the cookie to get to the ice cream.”*

The brand also launched high-end, super-premium ice cream sandwiches with decadent flavors like caramel cookies and cream, and caramel cashew ice cream with short bread cookies.

As more people are vaccinated and economies begin to re-open, Casper’s will relaunch Churn Baby this spring “as if we had never launched,” so with a lot of fanfare and positive excitement, which didn’t seem appropriate at the start of the pandemic when people were stressed and frightened, Parker said.

Lawes added that the launch also demonstrates how Casper’s can be a good partner for retailers by offering an assortment of Churn Baby products that will drive velocity and sales at a disproportionate rate for the shelf space it needs.

Balancing old and new media

While Casper’s pursues distribution for its new brand, it also is actively supporting its Fat Boy and Jolly Llama brands with a hybrid marketing approach that taps into the digital revolution while simultaneously staying grounded in real life with ‘old school’ marketing tactics, events and sponsorships.

Parker explains that as Casper’s scales to become a nationally distributed brand it is embracing a message that it believes will resonate with consumers across the country, which is America loves Fat Boy and Fat Boy loves America back.

The company is demonstrating its patriotism through partnerships that support first responders and veterans and by sponsoring a NASCAR, which some might consider a divisive move at this moment in time, but which has worked well for Casper’s.

“NASCAR gives us a very strategic advantage from Texas all the way to the Southeast, with such a strong following” that has increased in fervor during the pandemic as people look for comfort and normalcy, Parker explained.

“The other thing that we do that’s very traditional is we still do outdoor advertising across the country, using digital billboards where we can rotate the message out really at a moments notice if we want to be very nimble,” he said.

He explained that these types of marketing plays help drive consumers into stores, which is the best place for them to buy Casper’s products given the difficulty with shipping frozen food.

Micro-influencers offer outsized impact

While the company leverages these old school tactics, it is by no means stuck in the past when it comes to marketing, as illustrated by its embrace of 400 micro-influencers who are the backbone of the company's digital campaign.

Parker explains that teaming with micro-influencers is more work than partnering with a handful of big-name celebrities, but he says the approach better represents Casper's values and, when done right, can offer brands more bang for the marketing buck.

"Managing a lot of them isn't cheap," but Casper's tries to compensate as many as possible with product and negotiate better rates for longer term commitments, Parker said.

The company then closely monitors their effectiveness with a scoring system to ensure it continues to engage with the most effective partners, he added.

"Really what we use influencers for is to replace a lot of standard advertising media and also drive content for us. They can take pictures that we can't take without a large photoshoot and crews, and more importantly, a lot of the stuff that we post on social media we don't want to look and feel as processed as a professional shoot. We want it to look and feel real, and that is what these influencers give us every day," he said.

As Casper's balances online and offline marketing, Parker notes that the company is taking a deep dive into digital analytics to track the efficacy of its campaigns to not only ensure its marketing dollars are well spent but to show retailers that the company is a good partner that will help drive foot traffic and sales.