

Cheesy Garlic Bread Chips: Lay's Lesson in Marketing and Brand Awareness

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Let's face it — behind every popular consumer trend, you will usually find...a teenager.

Take, for example, Lay's potato chips very first "Do Us a Flavor" campaign back in 2012, when the parent company of Lay's, PepsiCo, asked people to come up with their ideal combination for the next flavor of Lay's. Winner Karen Weber-Mendham, a children's librarian from Land O' Lakes, Wis., in part credited her then 13-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter with helping her land on the cheesy garlic bread flavor that eventually won her the top \$1 million prize. She commented at the time, "I have three kids and whenever we go to an Italian restaurant as soon as they sit down they're of course thinking they'll die if they don't get fed immediately. They ask, 'Can we get garlic bread?' and I say no. Then I cave and I say yes," Weber-Mendham said. "When it comes, they dive for it. I figured if everybody liked it as much as my kids did, it would be a good flavor."

Of course, the Lay's "Do Us a Flavor" campaign is about more than the latest, tastiest junk food. It also tells us something about marketing – more specifically, the role that consumers play in the marketing and development of new products. Julia Drake, a freshman at Hopewell Valley Central High School in Pennington, N.J. (and a lover of Lay's potato chips), looks at it this way: "The role of consumers in marketing and the development of products is essential because consumers provide information on strategic marketing ideas, how to improve the product and the current trends that are popular. Social media can also be the bridge that makes this partnership successful."

Power in the Hands of the Consumer

Which brings us to our tasty case study. Lay's potato chips have been around for more than 75 years. That's long enough to be considered a classic — but also a little dated and, yes, stale.

To make the chips click (or crunch) with coveted millennial customers, PepsiCo didn't change the core product, "we changed the way that people looked at it," said Ann Mukherjee, president of the company's global snacks group and global insights division.

Along the way, the company also gained important insights about the way that modern customers think about brands, and how that impacts their purchase decisions in a rapidly changing marketplace.

“How do you take this unpredictability and give consumers what they’re looking for, which are often very unpredictable things?” Mukherjee asked during a presentation at Knowledge@Wharton’s recent Retail & Consumer Goods Executive Summit in New York City.

Thanks to digital technology, she noted, customers are no longer limited to their corner store for snack options — they can search for and buy just about anything from just about anywhere. It’s not enough to just create awareness of a brand: “If you’re not thinking all the way through to how to monetize it, you’re going to be in a lot of trouble,” Mukherjee added.

PepsiCo’s solution to upping the cool factor of Lay’s was to put the power in the hands of the consumer — which is why in 2012 it launched that first “Do Us a Flavor” campaign.

[“‘There’s a huge movement in the U.S. around food, the passion of food, entertainment around food, and food celebrities.’”?](#)

Mukherjee pointed out. “This wasn’t about Lays. We created tools that allowed people to celebrate their passion for food. Lays became a communication device for people to share about their daily lives.”

Anyone who had a chip idea in mind could visit Lays’ Facebook page, enter some information about their flavor and be rewarded with a shareable image of “their” bag of chips. The company teamed up with Facebook to turn the “like” button into a vote of “I’d Eat That.” Lay’s Facebook cover photo became a rotating billboard, which featured a new submission every few minutes.

A panel of judges and campaign spokespeople — celebrity chef Michael Symon and actress Eva Longoria — helped narrow the contest to three finalist flavors: sriracha, cheesy garlic bread and chicken and waffles, and then opened the vote for a winner to the public. In May 2013, after millions of fan votes were cast, it was announced that Lay’s Cheesy Garlic Bread flavored potato chips were America’s favorite, and Weber-Mendham, the finalist behind the winning idea, took home the \$1 million grand prize.

PepsiCo’s first “choose a flavor” campaign was actually held several years ago in the U.K. and by the time the U.S. competition launched, the company had already done it in several countries. “The first time we did it [in the U.S.], we estimated we’d get a million votes; we got four million,” Mukherjee noted. “Last year, we did it for the second time and got over 14 million votes.” Last year’s winning flavor was wasabi-ginger, submitted by Meneko Spigner McBeth, a nurse from Deptford, N.J. In case you’re wondering, it beat out three other potential new flavors: mango salsa, cheddar bacon mac & cheese and cappuccino.

From Focus Groups to Facebook

During the first campaign, when the inventory of the three finalist flavors arrived in stores for customers to buy and sample, they were gone in two hours, Mukherjee said.

[“‘People were selling bags online for \\$35.’”?](#)

she added. The campaign, now in its third year, worked because PepsiCo knew the problem it was trying to solve, Mukherjee said. What do we know about this year’s top flavors, which will be announced this summer? Not much yet — except that “cactus” was used as an ingredient 1,362 times and New York City came up with 7,574 more flavors than Los Angeles.

“One-hit wonders don’t work. We don’t do fads for the sake of fads — it has to be tightly wired to the strategy of your

brand,” she noted, adding that customization was key to making the contest appealing; so was the idea of letting consumers take ownership of sharing their chip creations or preferences.

[““The days of focus groups — it’s over,” she said. “It’s really about observing behavior. Big data comes together with granular understanding of human behavior.””?](#)

Mukherjee doesn’t see Lays abandoning “Do Us a Flavor” anytime soon. “We as marketers get bored before our customers do,” she noted. “We have strict metrics in terms of when we are beginning to see something peak.... If you think about it at scale, if you’re constantly reinventing, that’s really expensive. It’s more about how do you create a chassis [framework] and then be able to build on it year after year.”

Figuring out what works is all about longitudinal data, setting up experiments and learning over time, she noted. “There are some brands where traditional media has a big role,” Mukherjee said. “There are some brands where traditional media plays zero role. It’s all about what does the brand stand for, what does the brand stand with.”

Conversation Starters

Did you or someone you know participate in Lay’s “Do Us a Flavor” campaign? Tell your story to a partner or the class. What was the flavor and what was the motivation behind it? How did you follow the progress of the contest?

PepsiCo’s product portfolio includes a wide range of enjoyable foods and beverages, including 22 brands that generate more than \$1 billion each in estimated annual retail sales. Think products made by FritoLay, Tropicana, Quaker and Gatorade. Research PepsiCo and learn more about what it means to be a consumer-products company. How does a company like PepsiCo end up with so many brands? What is the company’s mission? Is innovation important to a company like FritoLay? Why or why not?

Ann Mukherjee, president of PepsiCo’s global snacks group and global insights division, says in the article, “The days of focus groups — it’s over. It’s really about observing behavior. Big data comes together with granular understanding of human behavior.” What does she mean by this? How is this a fundamental shift in the way marketing is conducted?

Related Links

- [Lay’s Do Us a Flavor Website](#)
- [Five Minute Marketing on the Lay’s Campaign](#)
- [Times Topics: Marketing and Advertising](#)
- [Knowledge@Wharton: How Old Brands Can Still Surprise Consumers](#)
- [Ad Week](#)