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A Novel Idea

Why some quick-service brands are thinking beyond the menu with new product rollouts.

BY BARNEY WOLF

Fans of certain limited-service restaurant companies are wearing their passion for these brands on their sleeves—sometimes literally.

A growing number of operators are designing brand-related apparel, accessories, and other novelty items in an effort to align themselves more closely to their customers. One company created pizza wedding bouquets; another, a swimming pool floatie.

“We’re focused on creating a brand our customers champion,” says Andrea Zahumensky, chief marketing officer at KFC, which came up with the idea of offering pool floaties—in the shape of the iconic Colonel Sanders, no less—in a contest. The swimming pool rafts are part of KFC’s effort to forge concepts “that show up in ways that surprise and delight” fans via approaches they “find exciting and relevant,” she adds. “I don’t think anyone expected us to create a Colonel Sanders floatie.”

Diana Kelter, senior trends analyst at marketing firm Mintel, wrote in a blog last year that the notion of extending a restaurant brand beyond its food and into new categories melds with the choice of millennials and Gen Z to discover trends on social media.

“In a social media culture, expanding into new territories is quickly becoming the norm in order to stay top of mind with younger consumers,” she wrote.

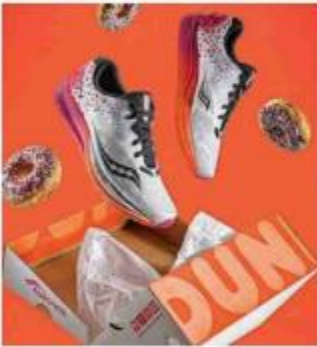
In many cases, novelty items are tied to a specific event, as when McDonald’s celebrated its delivery deal with UberEATS by launching a limited McDelivery Collection of clothing free to consumers who ordered delivery when the service began.

Pizza Hut helped get the ball rolling on this latest branding trend last year by developing special basketball shoes to mark the company’s return as a sponsor of the NCAA men’s basketball tournament. The shoes were dubbed Pie Tops, a play on the high-top shoe style. Each of the 64 pairs of white kicks, created by the Shoe Surgeon, Dominic Chambrone, featured the chain’s name and logo, plus a cool accessory: a button on the right tongue connected via Bluetooth to a mobile app to order the wearer’s favorite pie.

“The response was overwhelming,” says Courtney Moscovic, Pizza Hut’s manager for public relations and partnerships. This year’s tournament brought Pie Tops II in wheat or red colors, with



Pizza Hut’s Pie Tops, Villa’s pizza bouquet, and Dunkin’ running shoes (clockwise from top) all represent marketing tactics that extend beyond the menu.



not only the ordering button, but also another one on the left tongue that paused the TV “so you wouldn’t miss a second” of the games.

Retailing at \$150 each, the 250 pairs sold quickly via various channels. “At the end of the day, we’re a pizza company, not a shoe company,” Moscovic says, “but this is really a creative expression and fun way to tie Pizza Hut with March Madness.”

Shoes were an important part of another novelty campaign from a quick-serve brand: Dunkin’ Donuts and athletic footwear manufacturer Saucony teamed up to create a special shoe for this year’s Boston Marathon. The shoe fits nicely into the brand’s tagline, “America runs on Dunkin’,” but it’s much more than that, says Justin Unger, director of strategic partnerships. Saucony approached Dunkin’ with the insight that data from a running app found coffee was the most mentioned food or drink listed on the app, while doughnuts were sixth. “That was eye-opening,” Unger says.

Using an existing shoe platform, the companies came up with the Saucony X Dunkin’ Kinvara 9. The 2,000 pairs of shoes featured numerous Dunkin’ brand touches, from a strawberry-frosted doughnut image on the heel to a Dunkin’ logo on the tongue. Demand for the shoe—it quickly sold out— [CONTINUED ON PAGE 112]

and the related publicity were “beyond our expectations,” Unger says, adding that both companies benefited.

KFC tied its limited edition Colonel Sanders floatie—only 700 were made—to the launch of its Crispy Colonel Sandwich. A contest to win one began Memorial Day weekend, the traditional start of the swimming pool season. The company received more than a quarter of a million entries.

“We wanted to find a way to kick off summer,” Zahumensky says, “and what better way than to create a one-of-a-kind, exclusive Colonel Sanders floatie?” The floatie, which also happened to hold a bucket of chicken and a drink, debuted in a brief teaser ad featuring perpetually sun-crispy actor George Hamilton as an iteration of Colonel Sanders. But the sweepstakes was also announced through numerous social media platforms.

Summer is also wedding season, and pizza chain Villa Italian Kitchen came up with a must-have matrimonial item: pizza bouquets and boutonnières.

“Our guests are absolutely passionate about pizza, and we’re interested in creating pizza in interesting ways,” says Andrew Steinberg, chief operating officer of parent company Villa Restaurant Group, based in Morristown, New Jersey. “We wanted to help some couples have a better wedding day and bring some fun and quirkiness to it.”

Nearly 3,000 couples entered a contest to win a bouquet and boutonnière (or two of each), which were created by New York food stylist Jessie Bearden using freshly prepared pizza dough, mozzarella, fresh tomatoes, and pepperoni and then baked. Three winning couples were chosen.

The list of novelty items tied to limited-service restaurants continues to grow. Among others, Wendy’s—with the aid of a rapper—dropped a 10-minute mixtape, “We Beefin?” via numerous streaming services, while Auntie Anne’s partnered with six artists to create its For the Love of Pretzels collection of apparel and accessories to help raise money to fight childhood cancer.

This latest branding wrinkle is not likely to end soon, Kelter notes. That means operators must continue to look outside the box and seek out creative partners, “especially with social feeds having the power to launch a new trend at rapid speed.” 