

The Stupidest, Worst Idea Ever

A Case Study of the Diamond Shreddies Marketing Campaign

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Abstract

The Diamond Shreddies rebranding effort of 2008 was not only an incredible success for Post cereal, but also an outstanding advertising campaign that mocked industry conventions. By simply twisting the square-shaped cereal a mere 45 degrees, Post was able to make the 67-year-old breakfast product relevant again without creating a new cereal. It was agreed upon that the campaign was unique and entertaining enough to feature in a case study showing the communicative strategies involved, and how they related to the dialogical model of communication. Research showed how the parodic campaign was instrumental in boosting popularity of the cereal. Post had an understanding of its audience and didn't underestimate its capacity to decipher the campaign as a joke mocking industry conventions. This study provides insight into some of the company's strategies for success, particularly in terms of how they communicated with consumers and maintained a favourable reputation. Further research demonstrates how humor was used to increase sales of the product, as well as to persuade people to buy into the "idea" of a new cereal. Finally, potential ethical concerns about the use of humour in advertising are addressed.

The Stupidest, Worst Idea Ever:

A Case Study of the Diamond Shreddies Advertising Campaign

For more than 67 years, good, good whole wheat Shreddies has been a staple of the cold cereal breakfast aisle. It was a reliable, steady brand, but its image had become staid and worn. So, in 2006, Kraft Foods Canada, owners of the Post product line who make Shreddies cereal, approached the marketing experts at Ogilvy & Mather for help reenergizing this tired morning product. In a story of classic product meets new blood, 26-year-old Hunter Somerville, a lowly intern at Ogilvy & Mather in Toronto, rotated a single Shreddie a mere 45 degrees and created the world's first "Diamond Shreddie." He exclaimed aloud to his team, "Look! It's not a square, it's a diamond," to much laughter and groans. It was a gag he thought was the "stupidest, worst idea ever" (Kingston, 2008, pg. 2). Little did he know that he had just started one of the most creative, memorable, and influential breakfast cereal campaigns in recent history.

This simple twist on the waffled cereal was loved by senior Ogilvy and Kraft staff, and the concept was immediately approved. Thus began a much larger marketing campaign that involved billboards, television, print, the Internet, and of course, the unmistakable new Diamond Shreddies logo emblazoned on the box. The campaign was awarded the 2008 Grand Clio Award for Best Integrated Campaign and the 2008 Canadian Marketing Association's Best-of-the-Best award for a product that went through absolutely no change whatsoever. In addition to winning awards and heightening product awareness, the campaign generated tangible business results – Diamond Shreddies are directly credited for an incredible 18% spike in sales of the Shreddies product (Cassies 2008 Cases, 2008, pg. 8) .

The idea behind this particular campaign is incredibly simple but simultaneously incredibly inventive. In the advertising world, such creativity can be dangerous. As Wang, Di, Lou, and Zhou (2013) point out, "creative advertising needs to be both original and relevant or on strategy, and originality is inherently intertwined with risk and uncertainty, as highly original campaigns may be poorly perceived or even incite negative market response" (p. 42). Given this mindset, Diamond Shreddies was not only brilliantly creative but also smartly limited.

The Diamond Shreddies marketing campaign was tremendously successful at revitalizing an aging brand, and stands as an exemplary reflection of the dialogic model of communication in action. The marketing team understood the many ways in which the campaign was interacting with its customers, and provided for, and arguably even relied upon, audience feedback and interaction. Risks associated with some aspects of the campaign were understood by the team, and strategically curtailed to maintain control of the message. Their use of parodic persuasion was both successful and ethical, as it mostly respected the consumer's intelligence.

The Dialogic Model

As an advertising campaign, Diamond Shreddies featured feedback, interaction, and dialogue. These qualities are all exemplary of the dialogic model of communications, described by Walker (2011) as a model that “acknowledges that differences in perspectives may exist between communicators and doesn't assume that meaning is shared, but instead recognizes the interplay between difference and similarity of those involved in the communication process. It also attempts to moderate the ethical problem of the strategic model” (p. 19). Though the campaign ran before Twitter was a relevant communications tool, Post maintained a Facebook page as one means of conversing with their audience. Additionally, customers were encouraged to join the campaign by voting online for their favourite shape of Shreddie, diamond or square. In the case of true misunderstanding, Post was willing to engage seriously with their customers. Finally, though not necessarily intentionally but nevertheless demonstrating the inherent appeal of the core idea and its ability to create interaction, customers took to YouTube as they began applying the campaign's fundamental concept to other square products like the traditional cracker, and inventing Diamond Triscuits in the process.

Strategy

The obvious brilliance of this campaign lies in the fact that Diamond Shreddies did not change the recipe, texture, or taste of the cereal in any way, but the particular word they chose to market their “new” product was one of their first advertising strategies. The word “diamond” conjures up premiumness, sophistication, royalty

and superior imagery when compared to the bland, kid-friendly Shreddies. In the subconscious of our mind, a different part of the brain is activated when we hear the word “diamond.” Similarly, the word “square,” the traditional shape of the cereal against which the diamond shape was juxtaposed, carries negative connotations associated with lameness, a lack of fun, and an uptight, unrelaxed attitude.

Continuing the joke was crucial to the ongoing success of Diamond Shreddies, as well as the company’s image. It was important for the company to make sure consumers were in on the joke, as it not only made those people feel intelligent, but it also allowed Post to have a little bit of fun in the way they communicated to the public and media.

A press release in September of 2008 that highlighted the ongoing online debate between square and diamond shreddies was an opportunity for the cereal-making company to boast about their quirky campaign. It was also a chance to continue poking fun at the wackiness of their concept and traditional advertising and marketing. For instance, the press release included a quote from the fictional President of Shreddies commenting on the widespread appeal of the “new” cereal by saying “When we introduced 45 degree rotational technology to put a new twist on Shreddies - an old family favourite - we had no idea the widespread excitement and discussion that would erupt within Canada and beyond our borders” (Post, 2008).

Post also played up the fact that Diamond Shreddies voted higher than Square Shreddies from voters on their website. “We’ve found that Diamond Shreddies lovers, as you might expect, are the more laid back of the Shreddies crowd,” says the President of Shreddies. “Our customer service department has had quite an earful from our Square-loving friends,” he added (Post, 2008).

Consumers even added to the fun by submitting satirical complaints to the website. “You are sending the wrong information to kids about geometric shapes,” says one concerned parent, to whom the President of Shreddies responded: “You are partially correct, the true geometric name is Rhombus Shreddies, but unfortunately Rhombus failed miserably when tested against Diamond Shreddies in consumer groups” (Post, 2008). They even went so far as to mock the customer feedback mechanism with a series of commercials during their campaign, wherein the actual letters of concerned customers who had fallen for the prank (or were otherwise generally

unimpressed with it) were read aloud, and to which the President would comically respond, making fun of the complaint itself, before throwing the complaint into the trash.

It's clear that Post is using humour as a strong, communicative tactic and through comments and actions like these, they are also improving the company's reputation. Coupled with the TV spots, billboards and website, consumers see them as likeable and playful but the company also recognized their own limits, and responded to situations that could have resulted in the parody possibly getting out of their control. For example, as a gag, a retired lawyer in Surrey, BC by the name of George Gould actually made the news when he auctioned off what he called "the last square Shreddie" on eBay. A mock note was sent to Kraft by Mr. Gould, requesting confirmation that the cereal maker was in fact, NOT making any more square Shreddies. A letter was delivered to him explaining that "Diamond Shreddies are simply a square Shreddie piece that has been turned at a 45 degree angle. We hope that this encourages people who eat Shreddies to look at Shreddies in a whole new way -- and to have a good laugh as well!" (Kingston, 2008, pg. 3). Inside the letter was a coupon for a free box of Diamond Shreddies. Post's response demonstrates how they were taking control of the media in case some people thought the news broadcast was be real. They were prepared that some people may not get the joke, and this response is one of the few statements to openly admit that the diamond and square Shreddies are in fact the same product.

While Post continued to promote the idea of Diamond Shreddies through traditional advertising methods, it also made quite the impact online through various blogs, websites and social media. The bizarre campaign was generating discussion on internet forums, and people were posting videos on YouTube. It would seem that after looking at some of the content online, there was a surprising amount of people that simply didn't get the joke. In fact, some people felt betrayed by Post for not actually reinventing the cereal, and others couldn't believe the company was getting away with such a blatant attempt to trick people into buying a new cereal. A man even wrote to the Edmonton Journal saying, "I am not usually the suspicious type, but don't the new Diamond Shreddies look like the original Shreddies just flipped on their side?" (Kingston, 2008, pg. 2).

According to an article in the Journal of Advertising, one of the authors, Zinkhan (1994) said that "...in the case of parody (as is the case with all humorous messages), there is a danger when the audience does not 'get

the joke.' In some situations, this may simply lead to confusion. In other situations, however, audience members may find the parody or its characters to be offensive" (p. 5). Whether it was negative or positive comments online, the campaign got people talking and, in a sense, created awareness of the cereal. It was viral marketing at its finest, and the company didn't have to spend a dime doing so.

During its run, the Diamond Shreddies campaign was successful enough for Post, but they were also smart to not let it overstay its welcome. Some industry veterans were concerned that the parody may overshadow what is the most important thing -- the product. Due to the increase in sales, it is only fair for the company to want to continue pushing Diamond Shreddies and to keep the campaign rolling. An early idea was to do a Diamond Shreddies "recall" as their next move (Kingston, 2008). The idea was ultimately scrapped and was considered too risky, especially with the negative connotations to the word "recall." Post could have gotten carried away with the idea, and showed restraint on not pushing it any further than was necessary. They avoided what could have been a potentially harmful situation.

Persuasion and Ethics

The Diamond Shreddies advertising campaign is a parody of its own brand. Shreddies made fun of its old and worn-out image by playfully mocking the cereal's traditional square shape. The Diamond Shreddies campaign utilized parodied advertising as a persuasive marketing tactic and successfully increased their sales by doing so. Persuasion in the form of parody "can generally be advantageous in building attitudes toward a parodic ad" as parodic ads have a rich and varied effect on consumer attitudes (Roehm & Roehm, 2013, p. 12). Consumers know that when they are being advertised to, they are being persuaded. Instinctually, most people resist this. By creating an entertaining and humorous ad, the consumer is less resistant to persuasion. The Diamond Shreddies campaign applied parody to their own brand in order to persuade consumers to buy their product and were successful in doing so because they appropriated the right level of parody to be persuasive. Diamond Shreddies was neither over-the-top in their use of parody nor too subtle. Berlyne (1972) has argued "that a medium level of humorous entertainment generates [the] most pleasure by striking the optimal amount of arousal" (Teixeira

& Stipp, 2013, p. 3). They struck the right balance of humour and by doing so, captured attention and increased their sales.

Humour has a positive effect on attention, and once you have attention, you can begin to persuade. Chan (2011) indicates that “humour might be effective in persuasion in two ways. One is by creating positive affect. Humour advertisements bring people relaxed and happy feelings, these positive feelings may associate with the particular product/brand and change the audience attitude towards it” (p. 321). Humour is also effective because it is distracting. “The emotional responses elicited by humour interfere with the active process of counter-argumentation and consequently increase message receptivity” (Chan, 2011, p. 321). Countless studies show that humour, such as parody, for example, increase an advertisement’s capacity to persuade. Eisend (2009) supported the persuasive effect of humour with a “meta analysis which shows that humour enhances positive affect and purchase intention” (Chan, 2011, p. 322). Creative and entertaining ads are effective (Teixeira & Stipp, 2013, p. 2), and Diamond Shreddies accomplished effectiveness through its creative and entertaining self-parody. While there are many studies that reveal humour’s benefits, other studies have found that humour is not persuasive. “Zhang (1996) argued that the inconsistent findings obtained from the above studies are mainly due to an intervening variable - individual differences in need for cognition (NFC). It shapes the kind and amount of processing of a received message. Humour can exert its positive effect by blocking the central route to persuasion. However, some people are particularly motivated to engage in central processing even when the element of humour is present. Those people, considered as high in NFC, tend to treat the most persuasive communication as an intellectual challenge and are comparatively harder to be persuaded” (Chan, 2011, p. 322).

“Advertising is one type of communication that is designed to persuade” and persuasion can affect cognition, emotions, and behaviour (Chan, 2011, p. 330). The results from a study by Chan (2011) indicate that humour has “a significant effect on [the] behavioural component.” If a persuasive humour technique is used, people are more likely to buy the product. This is precisely what happened in the advertisement campaign of Diamond Shreddies. Chan (2011) stated that if a product is linked to amusement, it may induce a pleasant feeling in consumers, and that “feeling is then associated subconsciously with the persuasive information and enhances the

product image and one's intention to buy" (p. 330). This is consistent with previous research that indicated that "individuals 'who liked a commercial a lot were twice as likely to be persuaded by it than people who felt neutral'" (Chan, 2011, p. 330). Humour hinders critical thinking, so people are more likely to be persuaded because they have let their guard down and have not scrutinized the information. Humour in advertising has proven to be effective because of this, however, ethical concerns can be drawn at the same time. Chan (2011) notes that "the tactic somehow suggests a blurring between entertainment and promotion" (p. 332). When the lines between entertainment and persuasion become increasingly blurred, changes are created in an audience's attention, attitude, and behaviour (Chan, 2011, p. 332). Chan (2011) stated that "humour in commercials bribes our senses by camouflaging its selling intention" (p. 332). The question is, did the Diamond Shreddies campaign conceal its intentions with humour? Well, no. Any reasonable and rational person would be able to discern that they are being advertised to. Garrett (1961) made the following timeless observation: Persuasive advertising can pose a real problem if some of the persuasive techniques used are intended to by-pass the intellect and reduce rationality (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009, p. 84). The Diamond Shreddies campaign did the opposite of this. They did intend for their audience to get the joke and, therefore, still fall within an ethical realm of persuasive advertising. Cunningham (1999) has stated that "advertising ethics has been defined as 'what is right or good in the conduct of the advertising function. It is concerned with questions of what ought to be done, not just with what legally must be done'" (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009, p. 83). The campaign did what was right by letting the consumer in on the joke. They respected the consumer by respecting their intellect.

Lasting Impact

Due to its reception and popularity, other companies have since tried to mimic the success of Diamond Shreddies. In 2010, Kellogg's introduced Fruit Loops "Doubles" which were nothing more than two Fruit Loops fused together. Elements of the Diamond Shreddies campaign can also be found in the recent Twix "Left or Right" advertisements, wherein customers can vote online for their favourite half of the same chocolate bar. Neither has managed to duplicate the success of Diamond Shreddies, but were clearly influenced by it. To this day,

Diamond Shreddies remains not only a tremendous Canadian advertising success story, but also, as Post's Director of Marketing called it, "a touchstone against which new pitches are measured," and the campaign remains indelibly etched on Canadian advertising's subconscious.

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