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Burger King's 'Mouldy Burger Ad' - gimmick or genius?

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It was early February 2020. Burger King, an American multinational chain of hamburger fast food restaurants was in dilemma on whether to launch for Indian consumers their recently launched global advertising campaign that showcased Burger King's flagship Whopper burger decaying over a 34-day period (Exhibit 1). The campaign caused an unprecedented stir with the 'rotten ad' as it was apparently designed to highlight Burger King's decision to remove artificial preservatives from its products. Advertising pundits opined that

The campaign was bold and out-of-the-box. It was different and eye-catching. And it was unexpected and irreverent. At the same time the 'mouldy burger' campaign was a revolting visual, very unhygienic and unappetizing. The creative was contrary to all rules of selling food namely making the food look fresh, healthy and good-to-eat. The visualisation was created not intending to sell, but to shock.

Company was in a dilemma how Indian consumers would take on this Ad campaign. Would it have a significant effect on Burger King's brand awareness and subsequently in sales, or the ugly looking burger would keep Indian consumers away from the stores? In the recent launch of the Ad in the US, some asked whether the creative was an outstanding example of Burger King's creative genius, or was it a stunt, a gimmick, designed to win advertising awards; one that had left customers dumbfounded and perhaps a bit nauseous. Anticipating such response the burger chain announced that it would remove artificial colours, flavours and preservatives from its signature sandwich in the U.S. More than 400 outlets already had the additive-free burger, and the company expected all Whoppers to follow by the end of the year. But they were yet to figure out what to do for the Indian market.

The History of the 'rotten ad' campaign

Analysts felt that Burger King's 'rotten ad' trails back eleven years after McDonald's shut shop in Iceland when consumers follow online the live slow decay of its last consumer order — a non-perishable burger with fries kept inside a glass case like a prized gem. McDonald's closed its only three branches in Iceland during its financial crisis in 2009. As per the published document, on Oct. 31 of that year, just before the restaurant's closure, Icelander Hjortur Smarason bought a meal to conserve it. He said,

I decided to buy a last meal for its historical value since McDonald's was closing down. I had heard that McDonald's never decomposed so I just wanted to see if it was true or not.

Smarason first kept the meal in his garage but changed the location a few time till it was put on display like a work of art inside a glass case at a hostel in southern Iceland (**Exhibit 2**).

“People from around the world ... come here just to visit the burger,” said Sigurdur Gylfason, the owner of the establishment. The hotel apparently receives up to 400,000 hits daily¹.

McDonald’s response to its claim that its burgers appeared immune to decay stated in 2013 that

In the right environment, our burgers, like most other foods, could decompose. Specifically moisture was necessary for the withering to happen. So with sufficient desiccation, they were ‘unlikely to grow mould or bacteria or decompose’.

Industry people opined that the Burger King ‘mouldy burger’ ad obviously has its roots in the Iceland story. The all-natural-no preservatives Whopper had grown mould over a period of five weeks. In every stage, decomposition of the burger had been graphically captured and communicated in the ad by Burger King. This campaign was an on-brand dig at McDonald’s, whose burger was said not to decompose at all.

Effect of the ‘rotten ad’

For the fast food industry, it is difficult to have any products, or technological breakthrough innovation that can break the competitive landscape². The space that the fast food industry can develop in terms of market segmentation and price was actually not large. Hence it required perceptual disruption in communication, product packaging or even in publicity. The Rotten ad campaign of Burger King has faced extensive media coverage. The intention of the company however was to translate this millions of dollars of free media coverage into increased sales and consumer loyalty. Although very early, there had not been any evidence that showed the sales of Burger King has increased in the last couple of weeks or there was a steady switch from McDonald’s Big Mac to Burger King’s Whopper. It was not the interest of Burger King to associate its brand with rotten food and a un-appetizer unless there is a significant economic incentive to the company. Analysts believed that Burger King’s market challenger strategy was ingenious and clever. It was a gorilla strategy to attack McDonald’s non-perishable burger, at the same time communicating the health benefit of Burger King Whopper.

Response of US consumers’ to the ‘rotten ad’

¹The chosen bun: Decade-old McDonald’s burger’s decay livestreamed in Iceland, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/02/world/offbeat-world/chosen-bun-decade-old-mcdonalds-burgers-decay-livestreamed-iceland/#.XoGMunIQDIU>, accessed on 23rd March 2020

²Burger King Vs McDonald’s Ads War, <https://ewhabrandcommunication.wordpress.com/2019/05/01/burger-king-vs-mcdonalds-ads-war/> accessed on 23rd March 2020

Burger King's 'rotten ad' received a mixed response from consumers, according an analysis done by Ace Metrix³. The analysts found from a general group of consumers that the ad was rated 36% below the average quick service restaurant brand Ads. Twenty six percent viewers was completely turned passive from buying the Whopper after seeing the rotten burger ad⁴. There were negative emotional reactions towards mouldy Whopper ad as they mentioned their feelings as 'Ridiculous', 'Inappropriate'. Only 3% of viewers surveyed by a research company could directly connect to McDonald's non-perishable Big-Mac story although the 'rotten ad' commercial never mentioned its chief rival, McDonald's in the campaign.

At the same time instinctive responses showed that the ad attracted 10% higher attention levels than the average quick service restaurant's ad when viewed till the end of the commercial. The survey found that Burger King's Ad's central message in that commercial that the burger grew rotten due to no artificial preservatives, was communicated quite well and ranked as the "single best thing" about the ad among those surveyed despite viewers having one of the options to choose "nothing about this ad". Survey found that the collocation of nauseating illustrations with positive health related information created positive impact on viewers, creating strong internal conflict among many. Viewers acknowledged that the visual was unappetizing, at the same time many appreciated the natural decaying effects and the product information it conveyed.

The 'rotten ad' analysis on the US consumers

A research done by Ace Matrix found that mouldy Whopper's repulsive effects were prominent when tracked viewer's resonance with ad content on a second-by-second basis. The tracking had shown that Burger King builds positive interest in the first four seconds with the Whopper's construction, which eventually gets eroded as viewers watch the transformation of the appetising burger to a mouldy burger. Advertising analysts found a staggering drop in resonance at the first sign of rot (19-seconds), with the line trailing into negative territory⁵. A rare occurrence that very few ads generate when content is a turn off. **Exhibit 3** provided second-by-second tracking details of consumer resonance with the ad.

³Burger King's moldy Whopper ad sparks visceral reactions, but scores on subversion, by Peter Adams, 24th February 2020, <https://www.marketingdive.com/news/burger-kings-moldy-whopper-ad-sparks-visceral-reactions-but-scores-on-su/572827/> accessed on 20th March 2020

⁴Burger King's moldy Whopper ad sparks visceral reactions, but scores on subversion, <https://www.marketingdive.com/news/burger-kings-moldy-whopper-ad-sparks-visceral-reactions-but-scores-on-su/572827/> accessed on 20th March 2020

⁵ 'Burger King's Moldy Whopper Succeeded Miserably. Here's Why' by Ace Matrix in <http://www.acemetrix.com/insights/blog/burger-kings-moldy-whopper-succeeded-miserably-heres-why/> accessed on 20th March 2020

This reaction is echoed in the overwhelmingly negative emotional connection viewers voiced. A mental map of the key words said by the respondents is given in **Exhibit 4**.

While it may seem like a mentally scarring image, experts opined that the image of ‘Mouldy Whopper’ will fade in memories overtime. Just take eye-witness accounts. A study from the National Academy of Sciences explains that “eyewitness misidentifications can be characterized as failures of visual perception or memory, the former being seeing things inaccurately, the latter being loss of accuracy or precision in the storage, maintenance, and recall of what was seen.” In other words, our visual memory isn’t as sharp as what we see in the moment⁶. An analysis came in ABC News in the US is available in the following link of youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ksop5ro1cpI>

Indian Consumers and rotten ad

Burger King had showcased either value or lifestyle in almost all of its Ads for the Indian market. Company’s website showcased ‘For hunger so big, just 1 burger is never enough! Get 2 delicious Crispy Veg Burgers at Rs.59 and 2 Crispy Chicken burgers at Rs.79. Walk in to a Burger King outlet near you, now!’ Exhibit 5 shows a few print communications of Burger King targeting Indian consumers. Other QSR companies also followed the same route in their communication and showed the value and positive side of the communication.

While no QSR companies adopted a negative route in their communication, Indian electronics consumers first encountered negative communication through a commercial of Onida television where a devil was shown . The commercial of ONIDA 21 with the tagline, ‘Neighbour’s envy, Owner’s Pride’. The Youtube link of the TV commercial is (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zS0aCq9wK1w>)

As a consumer in India one has to follow McDonald’s non-perishable burger story to understand the dig. Most of the Indian consumers, analysts believed, may not remember a story from a decade ago in faraway Iceland.

Burger King in India

Burger King entered the Indian market in 2014, much after McDonald’s had entered in 1996. In the financial year 2018-19, Burger Kind clocked sales of Rs 6.44 billion in India from 3.89 billion during the previous year. It posted a 65% growth over last year and its losses reduced to Rs 160 million from 630 million during the previous year. For Burger King, in terms of

⁶Burger King’s moldy Whopper ad is dividing marketing experts, by Lucy Handley February 24, 2020, CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/20/burger-kings-moldy-whopper-ad-is-dividing-marketing-experts.html> accessed on 20th March 2020

store expansion. The company adopted aggressive expansion taking the store count to 187 by from 139 previous year. It offered entry level pricing and largest vegetarian menu among other quick service restaurant chains. Rajeev Varman, the CEO of Burger King India said⁷,

Even before we started the first restaurant, we were clear that Burger King's offerings need to be truly Indian. Our menu width means we are able to offer burgers that cater to the Indian palate and attract customers looking for everyday value," said. "In the last five years, we have focused on a strong expansion plan through strategic investment in brand building and national supply chain development and operational efficiencies.

McDonald's India

When McDonalds started in India in 1996, the main challenge was to convince Indians that burgers and soft drinks can constitute fast food. The customers were accustomed to local fast food choices and it took a lot of effort of the marketing department to popularize the concept of Burger meals. The market share of McDonald's in India amounted to INR 2.4bn, which was 11% of the total market share for the QSR segment. A comparative of two burger giants is given in Exhibit 6.

Burger King Ad taking dig on McDonald's internationally

Burger King recently launched its Valentine's Day campaign titled 'Lonely no more', asking customers to click a picture with the famous McDonald's clown Ronald McDonald to avail of a free whopper on Valentine's Day. The campaign has been conceptualised by Famous Innovations. While many appreciated Burger King's creativity behind the campaign, some also called out the brand. But, this is not the first time Burger King has taken a direct dig at its competition.

Burger King has a long history of taking digs at McDonald's through its campaigns. Burger King's 'Whopper Detour' campaign, which has won a Grand Prix in Cannes Lions in 2019, gave people in proximity to McDonalds a discount on BK burgers. Using geofencing technology, Burger King's Whopper Detour promotion unlocked when users came within 600 feet of a McDonald's restaurant. It required people to download the Burger King app and drive to a McDonald outlet after which they would automatically receive a coupon for a 1

⁷Burger King's India sales up 66% in FY19, by SagarMalvia, https://m.economictimes.com/industry/cons-products/food/burger-kings-india-sales-up-66-in-fy19/amp_articles/71471605.cms accessed on 24th March 2020

Cent whopper burger. According to reports, this campaign generated 1.5 million app impressions for Burger King.⁸

On the occasion of World Mental Health Awareness month, the brand introduced ‘real meal’ boxes. Each meal was designed for a feeling, ‘Pissed, Blue, Salty, Yaaas, DGAF.’ However, the campaign was perceived by some people to be taking a dig at McDonald’s as the meal boxes were strikingly similar to McDonald’s Happy Meal packaging⁹

In 2017, Burger King released a campaign around Halloween with the hashtag ‘scaryclownnight’. Leveraging around the popularity of clown costumes in 2017, the campaign asked people to dress as a clown to avail of a free burger, taking a direct dig at McDonald’s Ronald McDonald¹⁰

Burger King had removed artificial preservatives from the Whopper in around 400 of its 7,346 U.S. restaurants as well as several European countries. It planned to remove preservatives from its burgers with onions, lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise and pickles including sandwiches, sides and desserts served in all of its restaurants in the U.S. and select European countries by the end of this year. McDonald’s announced in 2018 that it was removing artificial colours, flavours and preservatives from seven of its burgers.

Indian brand experts’ response to Burger King Ads taking dig on McDonald’s

Samit Sinha, Founder and Managing Partner, Alchemist Brand Consulting Pvt. Ltd., said¹¹

“I think it’s a very interesting campaign and they have a history of taking potshots at McDonald’s, the same way Pepsi has a history of taking shots at Coke. Usually, people who get offended are the ones who actually bother to put their comments. The others who are amused or entertained by it won’t comment as people on social media use it more to criticise. Internationally, this kind of advertising is very common but in India, this is not done so overtly. This is a very overt way of doing it as Ronald McDonald is such an important icon of McDonald’s. Such campaigns are much polarised. A person who is a McDonald’s fan might get offended and others may find it entertaining.”

⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cwq6xe2XUk>

⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjxRUEA0Tdo>

¹⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXGjQJmSE>

¹¹Moldy burger? Burger King tries new advertising campaign, <https://www.uticaod.com/news/20200220/moldy-burger-burger-king-tries-new-advertising-campaign>, accessed 24th March 2020

Independent brand strategist AmbiParameswaran, on the other hand, said the idea of sending your target audience to your competitor's store does not seem convincing.

“Burger King is making a light-hearted comment, pulling the leg of its big competitor. Are you sending your customers to McDonald's? It would have been a gem of an idea if BK would give free burgers for one's valentine. A gem of an idea that you get a burger free for your valentine as Ronald practices solitary contemplation

Burger King's Dilemma

Response to the 'rotten ad' in the US was mixed. Burger King was not sure featuring mould in a food ad breaks all the rules of meal promotion, which usually involves beautifully-shot items that have been set up by stylists.

Exhibit 1: Burger King's of Mouldy Burger

(a) Print Ad



(b) TV commercial – Youtube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ef7xw2J500>

Exhibit 2. McDonald's burger with a side of fries in Iceland after a decade it was prepared.



Exhibit 3: Trace analysis output by Ace Matrix



Exhibit 6: Salient features of two Burger giants

	McDonald's	Burger King
Operation started in India	1996	2014
Financials of the Year Ending	FY18	FY18
Revenue (INR Millions)	11350	3780
3Yr.Rev CAGR	14%	186%
EBITDA Margin%	7%	[11%]
ROCE	2%	[22%]
Parameters	280 stores, Pan India	150 stores, Pan India
Average Revenue per person (INR Million)	2500	2500