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MAC 309
November 14, 2024
Advertisement Analysis

How Wendy's Creative Advertising Strategies Set It Apart

Across the past decades, Wendy's advertising has evolved significantly from 1960 to the present day in the 2020s. Today, Wendy's is one of the most popular fast-food brands in the United States, with numerous locations and franchises. From the start, Wendy's advertising strategies have been ground-breaking for the restaurant industry. The brand's prominent feature of Dave Thomas, the company's founder, effective catchphrase slogans, such as "Where's the Beef" (Ad 1, Ad 5), its emphasis on healthy, affordable quality food, especially in recent marketing, and its concern and measures taken to care for the environment, are the main themes that have led to Wendy's success.

Many of Wendy's advertisements, both traditional and online marketing, can be analyzed through Semiotics. This method allows for a deeper observation of the hidden meanings presented under an ad's surface. Semiotics is the study of how symbols and signs make meaning. Specifically, when observing advertisements, Semiotics assist in identifying how the visual and textual elements collaborate to sell a product effectively. Additionally, Semiotics help understand the denotations presented in ads, which involve the literal meaning of elements shown. Semiotics can also provide insights into the connotations hidden in advertising. The connotative meaning of an advertisement often explores how a commercial conveys a deeper message under the surface, which can often explore cultural and emotional aspects. Throughout this analysis, I will utilize the

technique of Semiotics to explore some examples of Wendy's advertising across multiple decades.

Dave Thomas in Early Years of Advertising

From the start, Dave Thomas appeared in numerous print and television advertisements (Ad 6, Ad 9) promoting his newly formed restaurant and establishing a relationship with potential customers ("Wendy's Unique Brand Differentiation"). At first, Thomas was reluctant to step into the spotlight, but he quickly became an icon for the brand due to his modest and genuine personality ("The Immeasurable Legacy of Dave Thomas"). Ads featuring Thomas showcasing him smiling or holding a spatula differed dramatically from the typical advertising of the time which emphasized flashy effects, including celebrities and lights ("The Immeasurable Legacy of Dave Thomas"). In Ad 6, the denotative meaning displays Thomas holding a salad and smiling, featuring "Fresh" and "Fast." When looking deeper, the cognitive meaning behind the ad exhibits a message of trust between Thomas, his products, and the customers. Making Thomas the image of Wendy's sparked a fierce loyalty between customers and the brand, something Wendy's is still known for today ("Exploring the Rich History of Wendy's: A Quick Summary"). Wendy's does an exceptional job of playing into the style of the times; for example, Ad 5 and Ad 7 showcase actors dressed appropriately for the 1980s and 1990s. Ad 7 utilizes a child actor whose hair is in a side ponytail and who wears a purple shirt while selling Wendy's all-new kid's meal.

Advertising Campaign Slogans

Wendy's emphasis on catchy taglines has brought attention to the brand, and even today, many people can quote slogans, including "Where's the Beef" (Ad 1) and

“Quality is Our Recipe” (Ad 12). Although Wendy’s began the idea of “Where’s the Beef” in 1960, the full campaign did not launch until 1984 (“Wendy’s ‘Where’s the Beef?’”). This creative strategy made fun of the size and quality of competitor’s hamburgers compared to Wendy’s. Receiving high levels of positive attention, this catchphrase increased sales and re-emphasized Wendy’s product value over other fast-food options. Recently, Wendy’s latest slogan, “Quality is Our Recipe” (Ad 12), has become well-known to consumers and signifies Wendy’s commitment to high-quality ingredients (Wendy’s 2022 Corporate Responsibility Report). Dedication to customer health has helped clarify Wendy’s motives and values, which builds credibility between the brands and consumers.

Emphasis on Healthy, Affordable Food Options

Customers’ views on fast food shifted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, prioritizing healthier options. Therefore, Wendy’s revamped some menu items emphasizing nutritious aspects to appeal to customers’ needs (Ad 6, Ad 10) as concerns surrounding healthy eating and fast food were beginning to emerge. At the same time, consumers still wanted quick, cheap meals, so Wendy’s figured out how to balance the affordability with the health value of its products. Two of the most significant additions to the menu included a salad bar and a baked potato, which can be seen in Ad 10 (“Wendy’s Marketing Strategy 2024: A Case Study”). These additions followed the fast-food trends of the day, which aimed to appeal to customers concerned with their health while still wanting a quick, affordable meal option. Ad 10 is beginning to transition from the style of the 1990s into the more modern style of the early 2000s. Additionally, newer advertisements like ads 10, 11, and 12 took the focus away from human actors

and solely featured food. Once again, in the early 2000s, fast food restaurants began to receive large amounts of criticism due to their lack of healthy choices, encouraging customers to eat poorly, which ultimately impacted their health (“Wendy’s Unique Brand Differentiation”). Wendy’s responded by providing additional healthy substitutes and emphasizing its fresh ingredients, such as never-frozen beef. Ads utilized bold, short text to promote the benefits of the food to customers. For instance, ad 10 says, “Costs less than a personal trainer,” referring to the salad, potato, and chili displayed below, and ad 9 states, “A balanced diet,” referring to the various size options of its hamburgers. Due to Wendy’s constant concern with high-quality products, the brand has stood apart from competitors, including McDonald’s, since the very beginning.

Wendy’s Environmental Contributions

Recently, Wendy’s has worked to focus more on sustainability and environmental goals, especially as the brand begins to remodel stores and build new locations. Some steps include minimizing environmental footprints and working on creating more sustainable and recyclable packaging (Wendy’s 2021 Corporate Responsibility Report). Additionally, Wendy’s plans to reduce emissions by 47% in 2030 by utilizing renewable energy and maximizing water usage (“Supporting Climate through GHG Reduction”). Through working with the U.S. Department of Energy on its “Better Buildings Water Challenge,” which aims to reduce water waste (“Wendy’s Corporate Responsibility Report, 2021”). Another large aspect of Wendy’s environmental conservation strategy is developing cups that contain 20% recycled plastic. Not only was this an extremely large step, but it marked an industry-first initiative for the brand, giving it a leg-up on competitors.

Adapting to New Trends in the Industry

Wendy's has always been quick to adapt to the trends of its time, placing its own spin on things. For example, ads 3 and 4 heavily feature the company's branding, emphasizing the bright color schemes and bold fonts of the 1980s. This was also a time when photography was known for being darker, which is evident through the black backgrounds of both advertisements. Once again, ad 8 utilizes the technique of a dark background to emphasize the product and the stylized text advertising Wendy's late hours. Recently, Wendy's has embraced its advertising strategy by capitalizing on a social media presence for the brand. Not only did Wendy's take advantage of the rising popularity of social media in the early 2000s, but to this day, the company continues to be very successful, especially on Twitter ("What You Can Learn from Wendy's Social Media Strategy"). Utilizing social media for marketing helps Wendy's appeal to a younger audience, and Wendy's is known for its humorous, sassy brand voice, often poking fun at its competitors. A trend that the brand has played into is "National Roast Day," which encourages fans of the brand to repost and share their best "roasts" or funny critiques ("How Wendy's Is 'Outplaying' the Competition by Making Connections"). The company has recently expanded its social media presence to TikTok, adopting many of the latest viral trends.

Integrated Marketing Communication Strategies (IMC)

Wendy's employs a steady balance of both digital and traditional media and works to create a cohesive brand image across all platforms. Even in today's world, where many brands have moved solely to advertising in a digital space, Wendy's recognizes the importance of traditional forms of marketing. One of the ways the brand employs

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) techniques is through promotions like its “4 for \$4” deal, which encourages repeat customer visits. Due to this high-demand, low-cost product, Wendy’s can appeal digitally, traditionally, and physically to customers by providing a quality product (“Wendy’s Evolves its Marketing Message”). Keeping consistent branding and messages across all advertising outlets allows Wendy’s to use successful IMC strategies.

Over the years, Wendy’s has continued to capitalize on its advertising techniques to separate itself from competitors. Its successful strategies of appealing to a wide range of customers with different needs, including quick meals, healthy food, and environmental concerns, enable Wendy’s to reach a broad demographic of customers. By utilizing Semiotics to analyze historic advertisements, it is evident that Wendy’s aims to share messages of authenticity and fresh ingredients with its customers. Additionally, Wendy’s capitalization on emerging advertising trends and technology has helped the brand stay current. Employing an active brand voice on social media enables the brand to interact with more customers, fostering personal relationships through responding to retweets, DMs, and comments. Overall, Wendy’s advertising strategies have greatly helped the brand grow and be the successful fast-food chain it is today.

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Twelve Advertisements

Ad 1 - 1960



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0aKKFybRNM>

Ad 2 - 1970



<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/494340496582425955/>

Ad 3 - 1980



<https://www.pictorem.com/458752/1984%20Wendys%20Big%20Classic%20Hamburger%20Ad.html>

Ad 4



<https://www.facebook.com/YesterdayInAmerica/posts/1981-wendys-advertisementwendys-old-fashioned-hamburgers-were-inspired-by-dave-t/785817353607327/>

Ad 5



<https://flashbak.com/remembering-clara-peller-wendys-wheres-beef-advertisements-59490/>

Ad 6 - 1990

"I know you're in a hurry. But, you still need to eat your vegetables."

Grilled Chicken Salad With a breadstick
Taco Salad
Deluxe Garden Salad With a breadstick

Fresh You love fresh salads, right? Well Wendy's® has five delicious salads, all made fresh. All available inside or at the Pick-Up Window. And all ready to go when you are. So if you want a fresh salad in a hurry, just come to a participating Wendy's.

FAST

And make sure you try one of our delicious new, reduced fat/reduced calorie salad dressings.

READY-TO-GO

FAT FREE FRENCH

Wendy's

HAMBURGERS

The biggest choice of fresh salads™

Dave Thom, Founder of Wendy's

Ad 7

<https://clickamericana.com/topics/food-drink/wendys-where-the-beef-salads-frosty>



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

Ad 8 - 2000



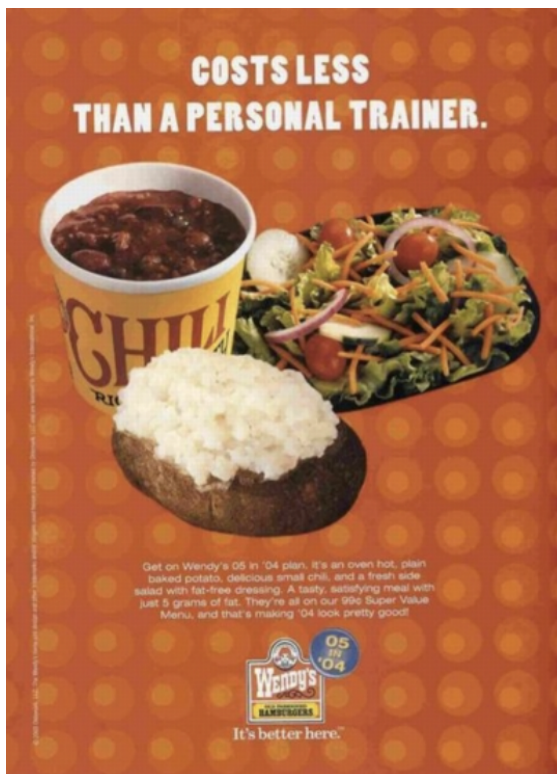
<https://www.ebay.com/itm/165702909290>

Ad 9



<https://www.ebay.com/itm/175414715275>

Ad 10 - 2010



Ad 11

<https://jessrovin.wordpress.com/2010/03/15/logical-fallacy-in-wendys-ad/>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=ErUZzdyaSxw>

Ad 12 - 2020



<https://www.ispot.tv/ad/dsFC/wendys-4-for-4-tackle-hunger>