

OK, Google, How Did Burger King Create the Longest 15-Second Ad in History?

Burger King’s “Google Home of the Whopper” campaign was tricky, cunning and undeniably the most successful in company history. Here’s how the restaurant chain subverted a tech giant for marketing success.

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Goal

An excited voice called Fernando Machado with a proposition to bend time: “Imagine if we created the longest 15-second TV commercial in history.”

Machado, Burger King’s head of global brand management, was skeptical. How can a 15-second spot be longer than 15 seconds? His skepticism gave way to curiosity, as David—the creative agency calling Machado—had won his trust. If anyone could manipulate time itself, it was David.

David has an “open brief” to break unwritten rules and generate what Machado calls “talkability” for Burger King. The burger chain’s regular ad campaigns keep the registers beeping, but campaigns with talkability are lottery tickets that pay off in virality. Machado went straight to David’s Miami office to hear its plan.

The presentation was simple: A TV commercial that starts with a crew member from Burger King talking about the Whopper and ends with him saying, “OK, Google. What’s the Whopper sandwich?,” triggering virtual assistants within earshot.

Machado was shocked. “I was like, really? Do you think this would work?”

A David employee pulled out a Google Home. On a video screen, a low-budget



version of the ad played: “OK, Google,” an on-screen actor said, uttering the device’s wake words. The Google Home lit up, recognizing the voice as if the actor had been in the room. With the device listening, the actor asked what the Whopper burger is. The device responded by reading the Whopper’s Wikipedia entry: “The Whopper is a hamburger, consisting of a flame-grilled 4 ounce beef patty, sesame seed bun, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, pickles, ketchup and sliced onion.”

“I was completely blown away,” Machado says. He quickly realized the idea’s potential to produce talkability, but just as quickly realized that David couldn’t be the only creative agency attempting to subvert this nascent technology. During the 2017 Super Bowl, just weeks before

Machado’s meeting at David’s office, a Google ad accidentally awakened consumers’ Google Homes. Others had to have seen that error as an opportunity, Machado thought.

“We know that this is the type of idea that pops up in different places at the same time, so we rushed to film the ad in the proper quality, prepared a press release and just went for it,” Machado says.

Action

Just before noon on April 12, 2017, Burger King employees gathered in the company’s Miami headquarters, their eyes nervously jutting down toward the screens of their devices. Some were more nervous than others; Machado felt the anxiety in the pit of his stomach and smiled. “When you feel that way, it means you probably hit something,” Machado says.

The ad was set to air just twice during prime time that evening, but the first salvo of reaction was expected much sooner. The media received a press release about the ad with a noon embargo, and just after noon, Burger King posted the ad to its YouTube channel. The response was swift: Google Home owners were creating their own videos, filming the ad waking up their devices and hurriedly posting the videos across the internet. The campaign generated more than 2 billion impressions in a couple hours.

Then, Machado says, the media “went crazy.”

Headlines flooded the web: “This Burger King Ad Is Trying To Control Your Google Home Device,” the Huffington Post said. “Burger King’s Sneaky New TV Ad Tricks Your Google Home Into Talking About the Whopper,” AdWeek reported.

Within two hours, Google quietly released a patch to block the commercial actor’s voice from waking the Google Home. Machado huddled with the David team. Having reached all the objectives for the campaign, the question was whether to stop, or continue playing and having fun. “Fortunately, we decided

to continue playing and having fun,” Machado says.

As the New York Times reported on the beef between Google and Burger King—“Burger King ‘O.K. Google’ Ad Doesn’t Seem O.K. With Google,” per the story’s headline—Machado and the David team went back to the studio to counterattack Google’s patch. They dubbed different voices over the ad—a female voice, a robot voice, a high-pitched voice—and, with hours to spare, sent the updated ads to TV stations.

Burger King’s rejoinder worked. During prime time, Google Homes across America blurted out information about the Whopper. “Burger King beats Google in showdown over sneaky ad,” the New York Post’s headline said.

But, as usual, the prankster was pranked back: Between April 12 and April 14, there were 104 edits of the Whopper’s Wikipedia entry. Pranksters modified the entry to say the Whopper was a “cancer-causing” burger, that it was a “100% rat meat and toenail clipping hamburger product” and even that the Whopper included “medium-sized child” as an ingredient, causing Google Homes to recite bizarre, disgusting sandwich descriptions to their owners. “Burger King ad lists Whopper ingredients as cyanide, rat meat, toenail clippings,” a headline by AV Club said.

“It’s just funny,” Machado says, his voice breaking into a high-pitched laugh when reading back the prank edits. “‘The Whopper contains rat meat;’ everyone knows that’s not true. People are a little bit smarter than that.”

Machado, of course, doesn’t want his nationwide burger chain associated with toenails, rat meat or cannibalism, but people were having fun. Brands have trouble getting consumers to pay attention to ads, let alone interact with them; to have consumers react on this level was incredible. This was talkability, exactly what Machado and the David team had set out to achieve. Plus, the Wikipedia entry was quickly protected from vandalism, and the Whopper’s definition was restored. “It’s all good,”



COMPANY

Burger King

HEADQUARTERS

Miami

CAMPAIGN TIMELINE

April 2017

RESULTS

10.5 billion impressions, \$135 million in earned media, 15 million YouTube views, Cannes Grand Prix Award

Machado says. “I find it hard to believe that people think that we didn’t predict it would go back.”

Results

Two months after the ad shook the news cycle, Business Insider raised Burger King’s arm in victory: “Burger King’s Google Home Whopper stunt wins advertising award.” The campaign won the 2017 Cannes Grand Prix in the Direct Category. Burger King’s goofy identity allowed it to become the prankster, the joker and likely the lone food chain in America that can survive being labeled as rat meat.

The rewards didn’t stop at awards: Burger King’s day of roistering through the internet netted 10.5 billion impressions and \$135 million in earned media. It was the most successful campaign in company history, Machado says, surpassing the McWhopper campaign’s 9.3 billion impressions—Burger King’s second-biggest campaign—and fetching more impressions than any of its infamous “King” ads.

While Machado won’t reveal sales numbers tied to the Google Home campaign, he says its ROI was “infinite,” as shooting was tacked onto a traditional commercial and cost little to film. Add to the infinite ROI the ad’s more than 15 million views on YouTube and the ineffable number of impressions from GIFs, memes, images, spoofs and Twitter posts.

But the explosive success of this ad was a one-shot deal, says Karsten Weide, vice president of media and entertainment at market intelligence firm IDC. Burger King’s campaign was funny and tongue-in-cheek, Weide says, but it was also the first to enter homes by force via voice-enabled speakers, and not without controversy. “I don’t think it has a future, just because it’s too intrusive,” Weide says.

The ad’s intrusiveness was mostly forgiven due to Burger King’s cheeky humor, but brands that attempt an encore may not be so easily absolved. Customers would likely develop hatred for brands that barge into their homes through their devices, Weide says, which would be especially insidious for advertisers when more people own voice-enabled speakers. While only 3 million voice-enabled speakers shipped in 2017, Strategy Analytics projects sales of 15 million units by 2020.

Aside from innovative forays into controversial terrain, ads are still nonexistent in the voice-enabled speaker market, Weide says—and that’s by design. Rather than ads, Weide suggests that companies create apps for virtual assistants—like Amazon’s Alexa—as consumers would find an app less intrusive than a device that spouts off at every commercial break.

Machado likely won’t try to expand time via voice-enabled speakers again, but he says he’ll never hesitate to jump into an innovative idea if it has potential for talkability. Machado’s cavalier attitude makes for anxious days at Burger King HQ, he says, but the anxiety would be there if they simply relied on hamburger-and-fry ad campaigns. “So we better just do it,” Machado says. **m**