

Got Advertising That Works?



How the “Got Milk?” campaign shook consumers out of their milk malaise.

By Jeff Manning and Kevin Lane Keller

THE 10-YEAR-OLD “Got Milk?” campaign—considered one of the most popular ad campaigns of the 1990s—was borne of necessity. In February 1993, the California Milk Processor Board (CMPB) was reviewing reports on per capita U.S. consumption of milk over the last 15 years. To anyone involved in the production and sales of milk, the numbers painted a disturbing picture. Not only had there been a steady decline in milk consumption over the previous two decades, but the decline was now accelerating. The CMPB’s ad budget paled in comparison to the big beverage marketers like Coca-Cola and Pepsi. With almost \$2 billion in media spending annually in beverages as a category, CMPB had to make the most of its \$23 million budget to have milk’s message heard among the noise.

To revitalize sales of a product in seemingly perpetual decline, CMPB and its ad agency Goodby, Silverstein & Partners developed the “Got Milk?” campaign. The campaign was based on a milk deprivation strategy that reminded consumers how inconvenient it was to be without milk when eating certain foods such as cereal, brownies, or chocolate chip cookies. The “Got Milk?” campaign was launched in November 1993.

Although focus groups indicated that consumers liked the ads, the actual launch exceeded all expectations. The campaign zoomed to a 60% aided-recall level in only three months, enjoyed 70% awareness within 6 months, and surpassed the long-running “It Does a Body Good” campaign in top-of-mind awareness in less than a year. The “Got Milk?” campaign quickly became a consumer favorite, prompting a *Los Angeles Times* reporter to comment, “Since the ad campaign began, it has reached a near-cult following.”

Not only did the campaign get consumers talking, it also exceeded initial expectations of merely stemming the sales decline by increasing actual milk consumption. The number of consumers who reported consuming milk at least “several times a week” jumped from 72% at the start of the campaign to 78% a year later. California household consumption of milk increased every month in the first year after the launch except for the first two months that the campaign began. This performance was in sharp contrast to the rest of the country where consumption actually declined over the same period. In the year prior to the campaign’s launch, California milk processors experienced a decline in

sales volume of 1.67% or \$18 million. A year after the launch, sales volume increased 1.07% or \$13 million, for a total turnaround of \$31 million. On a month-to-month comparison, sales volume had increased every month to rise 6.8% by the end of the first year.

“Got Milk?” is now deeply entrenched in the American vernacular. The campaign has virtually universal awareness, won just about every marketing and creative competition around, spawned more than 100 rip-offs, led to an unprecedented licensing program, been used in thousands of newspaper articles, justified a book, appeared on hundreds of celebrity moustache ads, and has been mentioned in popular TV shows. Not to mention the fact that it also helped stem the long-term decline in milk sales.

A number of key lessons emerged that help to shed light on arguably one of the most successful ad campaigns of the last decade and, more importantly, provide guidance to advertising and communication efforts for virtually any brand. On the tenth anniversary of the launch of the program, here are 10 of the most important lessons.

1. Target the right consumers. When sales slide, some firms mistakenly and

frantically attempt to attract new users to turn things around. The first step in stopping a sales decline, however, is making sure no other customers leave the brand franchise, especially those most loyal customers who generate much of the brand volume and profit. These customers typically will be most receptive to brand communications and, in fact, may actually be the best short-term source of sales growth. Once brand sales are stabilized, additional sources of growth via new market segments can be targeted.

Accordingly, in order to generate quick results, CMPB decided to target “regular” users of milk who used the product several times a week or more. Regular users constituted 70% of the California market and already had favorable attitudes toward drinking milk and presumably could be influenced in the short term. In contrast, non-

placed small video cameras in the refrigerators in the agency and took out all the milk to see how employees would react when they found out. One of the most productive research studies involved having a group of consumers go without milk for a week and return to the agency to share their experiences. Consumers’ tales of woe and despair made it clear that milk was an integral part of consumers’ lives, and their anecdotes and recollections even provided inspiration for later advertising creative.

3. Unearth a deeply competitive strategy and stay with it. The challenge in brand building these days is to find competitively unique, but also consumer-relevant, market positions. Because so many potential points of differences between brands have been competed away, it’s often difficult to find any viable opportunities in the marketplace. Uncovering those opportunities

enough about milk to be motivated to change their consumption habits. The typical milk campaign, emphasizing calcium and other vitamins, caused consumers to tune out. A new campaign had to break the mold for milk advertising, grab attention, and shake consumers out of their “milk malaise.”

Although so many people drank milk every day, milk suffered from a complete lack of consumer mind share. People just didn’t think about milk often enough at home, and they almost never thought about milk outside of the home. In order for any campaign to be successful, this lack of mind share had to change. One way to implement the change was to get consumers to stop taking milk for granted, to take them by surprise by creating a new and different image for milk.

Based on the consumer insight, the CMPB and Goodby, Silverstein & Partners decided to reach out to the regular users with a “deprivation strategy.” The most effective way to capitalize on milk’s relationship with food was to create an advertising campaign that paired the two together. Each ad in the campaign highlighted one of milk’s perfect complements: cereal, chocolate chip cookies, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and so on. The clever creative twist, however, was to deprive the main character of milk. The end result was delicious food *without milk*—the deprivation strategy. Certain foods without milk represented “cruel and unusual punishment” to most people, and the advertising campaign would set out to drive this message home. In each of the ads, a meal or snack would be essentially ruined because of the absence of milk.

Milk deprivation essentially redefined beverage marketing so that milk won and Coke and Snapple lost. It also spoke directly to an incredibly wide range of consumers: Running out of milk is a pain in the butt regardless of one’s age or income or lifestyle!

4. Entertain ... but sell. The right positioning and message is necessary but not sufficient to create a successful ad campaign—there must also be the

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users or light users typically refrained from milk for actual or perceived health reasons, which probably could not be changed very quickly.

2. Thoroughly study your target market to find fresh insights.

Consumer immersion is critical, and creative research invariably is needed to uncover fresh insights that will yield a stronger brand positioning. Qualitative and quantitative research are increasingly being supplemented by more experiential research where consumers are studied in more naturalistic settings.

To more fully understand their consumers, “Got Milk?” research efforts went beyond traditional focus groups and surveys. Goodby, Silverstein & Partners employed a series of creative, more experiential research studies. For example, to learn how consumers responded to running out of milk, they

requires leaving no stone unturned.

The key consumer insight that emerged from CMPB research was almost frighteningly simple and obvious: Sell milk with food. And yet, as CMPB reviewed milk advertising from around the country (and the world), it found that food was almost totally absent. Perhaps in an attempt to compete against soft drinks, the dairy industry had lost contact with its roots. Consumers hadn’t, though. They said time and time again that certain foods drive their milk decision.

Nobody doubted that previous milk campaigns successfully achieved positive shifts in consumer attitudes toward milk. What was missing, however, was a corresponding change in consumer behavior. Consumers knew milk was good and thought they should drink more of it, but they never thought

right creative. In other words, great advertising comes from knowing what to say, as well as how to say it.

The CMPB knew that other beverages had successfully built up strong brand images over the last decade and believed milk could do the same by taking a more lighthearted approach that talked directly to consumers. The dairy industry had taken itself too seriously. Eating is the most popular form of entertainment in California, the United States, and the world. Get people smiling at your advertising and they would look, listen, and consume more milk.

The television ads gradually built the tension that was so critical to the deprivation strategy. Each television ad began with a close-up of one of the food complements such as the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Once the desire for the food was established, the protagonist took a big bite. While joyfully chewing the food, the protagonist casually reached for a glass of milk.

Unfortunately, there was no more milk left in the container. A desperate search for even a single drop ensued, but all efforts were in vain. At the height of anguish, the voice-over pronounced, “Got Milk?”

The ads were funny, but relevant. Consumers could relate to the plight of the poor protagonist and, more important, got the message—running out of milk was no fun. The solution was obvious—be sure to always stock enough milk.

5. Treat the consumer with respect.

Advertising doesn’t have to aim for the lowest common denominator. In fact, the highest common denominator can be a breath of fresh air to consumers. By not considering what consumers would really like to see, advertisers fail to adopt the right consumer “voice” and thus use a completely wrong approach.

“Got Milk?” is an inherently humble idea. Rather than lecturing (a la Mom), it asks a simple, thought-provoking question: “Do you have enough milk?” It

displays a genuine interest in the consumer’s opinion that was unheard of in 1993. Think of how much difference one letter would have made—“Get Milk!” instead of “Got Milk?”

6. Adopt a memorable and inspiring brand slogan and signature.

Too often, consumers fail to grasp the meaning of ad campaigns or, even worse, draw the wrong conclusions. In such cases, help the consumer out. Devise a few words or a short phrase as a brand slogan or ad



tag line that captures the essence of the ad campaign and what it intends to say about the brand. Then use the brand slogan to the fullest extent possible.

For example, the brand slogan can be a vital part of the brand signature—the way the brand is identified at the conclusion of a TV or radio ad or displayed within a print ad. The brand signature must creatively engage the consumer and cause him or her to pay more attention to the brand itself and, as a consequence, increase the strength of brand associations created by the ad. An effective brand signature can dynamically and stylistically provide a seamless connection to the ad as a whole, improving recall and motivating purchase.

“Got Milk?” was a powerful call to

action and distilled the brand positioning and message of the ad down to two simple words. Effectively, it functioned as a hook or handle to the intent and main message of the campaign. It was shorthand to consumers that boiled down the key take-away that CMPB wanted to have happen. Moreover, the synonymous brand name and slogan was often used in a manner fitting the ad (e.g., in flames for the “yuppie in hell” ad or in primary school print for the “school lunchroom bully” ad), further enhancing its ability to function as a hook to the brand message.

7. Integrate, integrate, integrate. The days when it was the case that “if you build a great ad, they will come” are long gone. Ad campaigns must incorporate multiple media, taking advantage of the unique characteristics of each and blending them together so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In order to maximize the impact on consumer behavior, the media strategy for “Got Milk?” focused on consumers in the place where they typically used milk (in the home) and where they typically bought milk (in the supermarket). According to CMPB, there were three ideal times to communicate the milk message: on the way to the store, in the store, and at home where milk could be immediately consumed. The media strategy complemented the overall communications strategy to reach this goal. The advertising creative strategy motivated consumers to crave the featured food and/or check their refrigerators for the availability of milk. The media strategy focused primarily on television as the medium, thereby catching consumers in their homes where 90% of total milk is consumed. Furthermore, the media buy for the ads typically concentrated on those times of day when consumers drank the most milk (i.e., mornings during breakfast, late evening snacks, and so on). It was thought that timing ads in this manner—given the “call to action” nature of the campaign—

could potentially lead to more impulse usage of milk. Each usage occasion was further broken down into the type of user in order to purchase television advertising time. Children were targeted in the early morning hours as well as late afternoons, while adults were targeted at

and featured the same foods as the television ads with one bite taken out. Of course, each billboard prominently displayed the key question: “Got Milk?” The intention was to get consumers thinking about milk before they entered the store so they would buy milk once

Milk?” would have failed if it had only been a TV campaign. It was the magic of TV, outdoor billboards, publicity, cross promotions, and licensing that took “Got Milk?” from an ad to an icon.

8. Don't try to make it alone.

Increasingly, brands are being built with the assistance and help of other brands. Co-branding, ingredient branding, brand alliances, and joint promotions are all ways to partner with other brands in an attempt to find “win-win” solutions that lead to greater brand equity and better profitability than would have otherwise been possible.

Breaking with the past milk campaigns, CMPB decided to leverage milk's relationship with food by partnering with those foods instead of relying on pulling consumers over to the dairy case. The complementary television, radio, print, and billboard campaigns all leveraged this relationship and capitalized on the advertising budgets of sever-

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prime time and late night snack times.

To capitalize on the remaining communications expenditures within the store, the “Got Milk?” billboards were located near supermarkets as a reminder to consumers before they entered the store. Billboards and signs at bus shelters reinforced the television campaign

they were inside. Other promotions included milk coupons on many recognizable brands of complementary foods located throughout the supermarket, point of purchase displays, shelf talkers at the complementary food locations, and “Got Milk?” check-out dividers.

It could be strongly argued that “Got

The “Got Milk?” advertising campaign has also met with critical acclaim.

In 1995, the ads won an Effie Award, as well as top honors from several other major advertising award committees. In September of that same year, “Got Milk?” joined the familiar “milk moustache” program as a national campaign, and the Goodby, Silverstein & Partners ads began receiving national exposure in television, print, and outdoor media.

Though the only commonly shared element of the two commercial series was the prominence of milk, consumers assumed that the two series originated from the same source. In fact, the dairy farmers' group, Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), controlled the national “Got Milk?” campaign while the National Milk Processors' Education Program (MilkPEP) funded the milk moustache campaign. DMI had approached the CMPB to purchase the licensing rights to “Got Milk?” to replace its own campaign. In California, the CMPB continued to govern the “Got Milk?” campaign, employing Goodby, Silverstein & Partners to develop the ads. Leo Burnett USA handled the national “Got Milk?” creative after Goodby, Silverstein & Partners licensed its work, while Bozell Worldwide did the milk moustache ad work. Perhaps in an effort to consolidate the equity achieved by the separate campaigns, MilkPEP obtained licensing rights to the slogan in 1998 and replaced the milk moustache ads' tag line “Milk. What a Surprise” with Dairy Management's “Got Milk?” That same year, the two milk groups forged a partnership that combined their considerable advertising budgets, pooling DMI's \$70 million TV and outdoor budget and MilkPEP's \$110 million milk moustache budget.

The “Got Milk?” campaign continues to be strong and pay dividends. For 2002 and the first half of 2003, milk sales in California, where the ad campaign is centered, increased roughly 1.5%, whereas sales in the rest of the country remained flat.



al major brands of cereals and cookies. "Got Milk?" could not have gone far without its host of "co-dependent" brands: Nesquik, Oreos, Cheerios, Girl Scout cookies, even Cookie Monster and Snap!Crackle! & Pop! These alliances helped elevate "Got Milk?" to an unchallenged position in the minds of consumers, the media, and the retail trade.

9. Keep campaigns ... but keep them fresh. One common mistake in advertising is that successful campaigns are dropped too soon because marketers and their agencies tire of the campaign sooner than consumers actually do. Unfortunately, more often than not, there is no "Plan B" and an updated, rejuvenated version of the old ad campaign would have had a much greater likelihood of success than an unknown or untested new ad campaign. When your board of directors starts to get bored with your campaign, run it another five years.

Sure we get tired of our own campaigns. We think about them and watch them and talk about them all the time. It

would have been easy to drop "Got Milk?" after four or five years, when the first "God, can't we do something new?" remark surfaced. Thankfully, that didn't happen and the tag line is conservatively valued at more than \$1 billion and an irreplaceable asset to the milk industry.

10. Treat agencies as partners and keep the focus on great work. Adversarial relationships rarely work, and the most successful and longest running ad campaigns often come from establishing a high degree of trust between a core group of decision-makers for the client and agency. Less can be more, and getting the right people involved (no more or no less) is critical. Therefore, streamline, prune, and then cut some more people out of the marketing department. There is a basic, nearly immutable rule: Advertising gets more fractured, self-serving, and plain old dumb with each person that passes judgment on it.

"Got Milk?" creative has been approved (or disapproved) by the same person since day one. At the same time,

advertising is often the single largest discretionary expense on the spreadsheet. Yet the CEO is often completely removed from strategic development and the work that goes on the air. The CMPB CEO viewed every single focus group (more than 150).

It's also important to build pliant, trusting, enduring relationships with agency principals. In 1993, the CMPB's stated goal was to become Goodby, Silverstein & Partners' best client. Despite his agency having more than quadrupled in size, Jeff Goodby, the agency founder and creative talent, still works on "Got Milk?" Importantly, he doesn't just glance at finished TV spots. Rather, he actually pencils and doodles layouts.

A *New Yorker* cartoon from the early '70s still rings true. It depicts two white-haired, executive types fishing from a rowboat. One says; "We haven't caught a fish all day." The other replies; "Right, let's fire the agency." Client management must take full responsibility for the results of the advertising it approves. Changing CMOs and firing agencies doesn't get rid of mediocre advertising. It only amplifies it.

The principles applied in developing and running the landmark "Got Milk?" ad campaign are relevant to virtually any brand. Ensuring that brand advertising adheres to these principles can be an important means of enhancing the productivity and longevity of any ad campaign. ■

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