

CREATING A BUZZ



by Cynthia Whitney-Ward

Be daring, be different, be impractical, be anything that will assert integrity of purpose and imaginative vision against the play-it-safers, the creatures of the commonplace, the slaves of the ordinary.

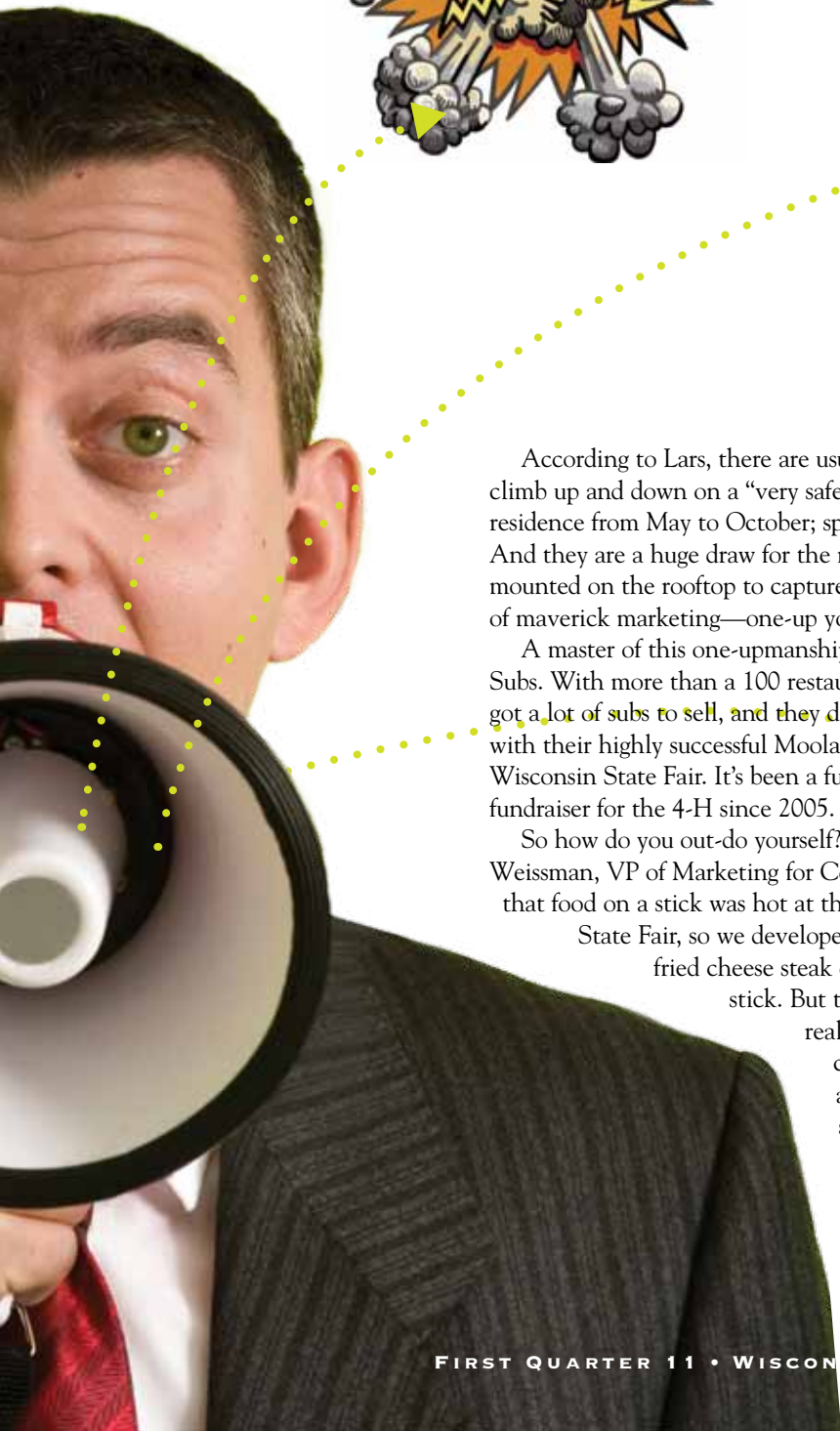
—Sir Cecil Beaton (renowned photographer and designer)

Sir Beaton's advice is spot-on defining what it takes to be a maverick, out-of-the-box thinker and marketer. And there are a slew of entrepreneurial daredevils in Wisconsin who are pulling off some imaginative marketing campaigns that are not only generating mega publicity for their restaurants, but dramatically affecting their bottom line.

Perhaps the grandfather of the provocative marketing scheme is the George Webb Restaurant campaign that lasted more than fifty years. Webb, a passionate baseball fan, promised to hand out free hamburgers at all 42 restaurants in the Southeastern Wisconsin chain if the Milwaukee Braves could win 12 straight games. He kept the offer open year after year, but the Braves never pulled it off. Then the Brewers moved to Milwaukee and he renewed the pledge. In 1987, it happened, the Brewers led off the season with 13 straight wins and Webb served more than 168,000 free hamburgers.

And then there's Al Johnson's Swedish Restaurant in Sister Bay, Door County, Wisconsin. Back in 1973 when the restaurant was renovated, a special roof was designed that was seeded with grass and then populated with a gaggle of goats—in keeping with an old Scandinavian tradition. The first goat was named Oscar and many more have followed. "Our visitors fall in love with the goats and are always so concerned about them," says Lars Johnson, who runs the restaurant now with siblings Rolf and Annika.

THE ART OF MAVERICK MARKETING



According to Lars, there are usually five to seven goats on the roof at any one time, able to climb up and down on a “very safe” slanted ladder with special footholds. The goats are in roof residence from May to October; spending the winter months in a warm barn and inviting pasture. And they are a huge draw for the restaurant. But the latest coup is a “Goat Cam” strategically mounted on the rooftop to capture the daily antics of the goats. And therein lies one of the tenets of maverick marketing—one-up your own successful marketing campaign.

A master of this one-upmanship is the popular Wisconsin-based restaurant chain Cousins Subs. With more than a 100 restaurants in six states, including Wisconsin, they’ve got a lot of subs to sell, and they do it quite creatively. Everyone is familiar with their highly successful Moolapalooza cow mooing competition at the Wisconsin State Fair. It’s been a fun, creative and highly-successful fundraiser for the 4-H since 2005.

So how do you out-do yourself? “Well,” says Larry Weissman, VP of Marketing for Cousins, “we knew that food on a stick was hot at the Wisconsin

State Fair, so we developed a deep fried cheese steak on a stick. But then we

really got

creative and added a lucky

stick component to the

campaign. If you got the cheese

steak with the word WINNER

etched on the stick, you were the big

winner for the day.” The promotion

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ran for the eleven days of the fair, and according to Weissman, generated enormous publicity and broke all sales records. “You might say that we won the blue ribbon with that one,” laughs Weissman. His advice? “Try to enhance an already successful marketing idea; take it that one step further.”

Another tenet of successful maverick marketing is reading the signs of the time and integrating them into a nifty campaign. Culver’s is a master of that technique. For example, when Green Bay Packer quarterback, Brett Favre, announced his retirement again, Culver’s decided to build a campaign around this news. They announced that the Culver’s Turtle Sundae was retiring from their menu and did a Facebook challenge for fans to share their Turtle Sundae Love in four words (Brett’s number), in hopes that the sundae would stay on the menu.

“The response was overwhelming,” says Paul Pitas Director of Public Relations & Communications with Culver Franchising System, Inc. “We even held a faux news conference where Culver’s Co-Founder, Craig Culver, pontificated about this ice cream legend: ‘The Turtle Sundae had one of the greatest careers in the history of desserts.’” Why did this campaign work so well? “People are passionate about football and Brett Favre,” says Pitas, “and, this campaign tied all of that energy and excitement to a Culver’s product.” Then Culver’s came up with The Ultimate Burger Build Off last summer, challenging Facebook fans to create their own butter burger recipe that would debut on the Culver menu. “While you really need to stay current on what’s going on around you and tie that into your campaign,” says Pitas, “it’s crucial that you stay true to the mission and vision of your organization. Your marketing venture has to tie in with who you are as a company.”

But before you go off into the wild blue yonder of guerilla marketing, there are important ground rules for creating an out-of-the-box campaign that works and doesn’t backfire. Some well-meaning maverick marketing campaigns have

gone terribly wrong. Before you jump into anything, it’s important to make sure you have it well-planned and you’ve considered any unintended consequences. For example, if you say you’re going to give away free pizzas if the Super Bowl goes into overtime (Papa John’s most recent marketing ploy), you need to crunch the numbers to make sure you’re not going to lose your shirt. It’s also important to make sure what you’re doing fits your brand.



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Humor seems to play a key role in the making of a maverick marketing campaign. Ruby Tuesday restaurants are in 44 states—one in Milwaukee—and when they pledged to renovate the interiors of all of their restaurants, they pulled off a very funny live web event to demonstrate their commitment to change. They announced that they were going to blow up one of the last “old” Ruby Tuesday restaurants. On the appointed day, crowds gathered, cameras were rolling and when the enormous blast went off, Ruby Tuesday was still standing. The camera shifted and you saw that they had blown up Cheeky’s Bar & Grill restaurant next door. Oops! It was really a “cheeky” viral marketing stunt.

“It went viral; we got an immeasurable amount of publicity.” says Dave Oakley, President & Creative

Director of Boone Oakley, the Charlotte, North Carolina agency of record for Ruby Tuesday. “You can’t rely on word of mouth anymore to fill your restaurant, you have to really make a name for yourself,” says Oakley, whose agency’s webpage is a wacky animated YouTube video that takes on the big boy agencies in New York (www.booneoakley.com). “But,” cautions Oakley, “whatever maverick campaign you dream up, it has got to be a good fit for your brand.”

Noodles & Co. restaurants offers noodles, salads and sandwiches from around the world on their menu, all for around seven bucks—the perfect price point for a college town. And since the company has lots of restaurants in college towns, a recent promotion—the Lunch Buddy Card—was directed at parents of all those college kids. Parents can pre-pay for the card and send it off with their kids, knowing that they’ll be well-fed at Noodles & Co.

“It’s a fun program,” says Noodles & Co. spokesperson, Jill Preston, who says that the cards can be personalized with a photo and fun stickers. “We launched it in September on our website, publicized it on Facebook and twitter and reached out to bloggers. Social media is fast and easy to execute and you get immediate feedback. We like campaigns that are engaging and build relationships. It’s the best way to create trust and loyalty.”

YouTube, the six-year old video phenomena and the fourth most-visited website in the world plays an enormous



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role in out-of-the-box marketing. A case in point is the wildly successful series of YouTube videos produced by Blendtec, a Utah-based industrial strength blender company. The series, called “Will it Blend,” has generated more than five million viewers. Each video features an attempt (almost always successful) to blend something outrageous like iPhones and hockey pucks, which the mighty blender shredded into tiny pieces.

Closer to home, the legendary Famous Dave’s BBQ, born in Hayward, Wisconsin and now in 37 states, has embraced YouTube for their marketing bravado. A recent campaign—the Famous Fan Film Festival—challenged folks to create a short video on YouTube to parody their favorite film scene with a Famous Dave’s twist. The prize? A thousand bucks. The response? “Overwhelming,” says Aric Nissen, Famous Dave’s VP of Marketing and R&D. “We got a hundred videos. The fans were creative and passionate about our product and the campaign helped to create a stronger bond with our fans and future fan community.”



“[Ian’s] garnered a lot of media attention by hosting irreverent fundraisers and contests.”

Ian’s Pizza, with two locations in Madison, and more recent forays into Milwaukee and Chicago, has created quite a buzz for their wacky pizzas like lasagna, mac and cheese and steak frites. And they’ve garnered a lot of media attention by hosting irreverent fundraisers and contests like their annual Pizza Eating Contest. This year’s event was held at the UW Madison Library Mall with contestants competing in two rounds—cheese slices first, with winners of the six heats moving on to mac and cheese

slices. The winner was crowned King and awarded an iPad and a semester’s worth of free pizza. This fall, the State Street location teamed up with the Madison arm of Carrotmob, a group supporting local businesses to become more sustainable, implementing green practices within their facilities. Ian’s and Carrotmob staged a “boycott”—complete with a DJ, dancing and carrot mascot and used social media to draw a large crowd to the restaurant. The successful event raised both awareness and money for a solar energy hot water heater for the restaurant. Ian’s even created a signature Carrotmob slice for the event—carrots, parsnips and daikon with a Dijon cream sauce.



“Sorge [owner, AJ Bombers] reported a 30% increase on sales of menu items promoted on Foursquare.”

AJ Bombers, a new independent burger joint in Milwaukee, has only been open for about a year, but their savvy use of social media has garnered them attention in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. And they were recently pitted against the venerable burger purveyor Sobelman’s Pub & Grill on the Travel Channel’s *Food Wars*. Very active on Twitter and Facebook, owners Joe and Angie Sorge have also tapped into the power of Foursquare, a location-based social media network, where users “check in” at a location via mobile phone applications to share their whereabouts with friends. Participating businesses, like AJ Bombers, can offer customers special promos and allow them to earn points towards “badges” and “Mayorships.” In the *Wall Street Journal* article, Sorge reported a 30% increase on sales of menu items promoted on Foursquare.

For anyone new to unconventional marketing, there are scores of books, videos and workshops out there ready to point you in the right direction. Jay Conrad Levinson, the father of guerilla marketing and master at promoting unconventional ways of pursuing conventional goals, penned his first book in 1984. His latest book—*Guerilla Social Media Marketing*—is packed with advice about growing your online presence.

But perhaps the Godzilla of maverick marketing is Steven Schussler, the founder of the wildly-successful Rainforest Cafes, and the author of the just-published book, *It’s a Jungle in There*—an inspiring romp through the author’s acts of entrepreneurial daring. Schussler is intrepid and innovative. When he dreamed up the Rainforest Café concept, he literally transformed his own house into a rainforest—replete with tropical plants and exotic birds—in order to woo investors. Today Rainforest Cafes hold the record as one of the top-grossing restaurant concepts in the US.

“The best advice that I can give,” says Schussler, “is to never give up no matter what. If you really believe in your idea, do your research and develop the concept in depth. You also need to work on your inner strength to carry out your dream.” But no matter how well you market your restaurant, implores Schussler, if the food, the staff and the small details aren’t executed well, all the clever marketing in the world won’t make people feel that wow factor.

The next piece of advice, says Schussler, is to develop relationships and networking with people who are smarter than you; that you respect and that have integrity. “Strategic partnerships are invaluable. No one creates in a vacuum. You simply can’t do it alone.”

And keeping current on the latest trends is key, adds Schussler. “Technology changes so rapidly. It’s important to adjust your marketing vision and embrace new directions and possibilities like social media.”

So, in the spirit of Sir Cecil Beaton and all the maverick marketers in this article—*Be daring, be different, be impractical...* **WR**