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Fourth of July Marketing Magic

By Allan Chernoff

It's disgusting, downright repulsive, dangerous, and without question extremely unhealthy, indeed, frequent practice could lead to serious disease. But it's Fourth of July marketing magic.

Few companies would dare sign off on a public relations stunt with such caveats. Most would run from it. But Nathan's Famous is bold and smart enough to wholeheartedly – heartburn and all – embrace a speed eating contest that has become as famous as its brand, even as contestants belch, vomit, slobber, and in rare circumstances, excrete processed meat through the nose (yes, I've witnessed all these unsightly consequences of competitive eating). In fact, the annual [Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest](#), to be held this Friday at high noon EST in Coney Island, Brooklyn and broadcast on ESPN, is a core of the company's entire marketing program, which forgoes television advertising.

“The Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest is the single greatest PR event in the restaurant industry in the U.S. today,” proclaimed the company's President, Wayne Norbitz. It's not an idle boast. Nathan's Famous (NASDAQ: NATH), founded in Coney Island, has consistently grown revenues and earnings to new heights as the Contest's notoriety has spread, with five-year earnings-per-share growth of nearly 18 percent, exceptional for a restaurant chain. Little wonder, Nathan's Famous is included on Forbes' List of [America's Best Small Companies](#), at number 55, the highest-ranked restaurant chain.

Much of the credit goes to the company's zany July 4th event. It is, after all, a perfect fit to wrap a hot dog retailer in patriotic summertime tradition. Nathan's, though, recognizes as well as any company that it's selling more than a product; it's selling an experience. Americans eat hot dogs not merely to satisfy their taste buds, but also to partake in fun activities, whether at a cookout, campfire, ballgame, or family outing. Every time a consumer bites into a Nathan's frank Norbitz wants the taste to trigger and reinforce memories of good times. On July 4th Nathan's connects its brand to far more than a crazy contest; Nathan's becomes part of summertime, the beach,

amusement parks – particularly Brooklyn’s Coney Island – cheering fans, and of course, flag-waving patriotic tradition, reinforced by global media attention.

In the 1970s the contest was just a small sideshow, thought up by PR stuntman Max Rosey, assisted by Norbitz, a young Nathan’s employee at the time. Brothers George and Richard Shea of Shea Communications are the public relations team that has transformed the event into a global phenomenon, by making it as outrageous and fun as possible. Thus, the Mustard Yellow Championship Belt, the pre-competition weigh-in, the wrestling-inspired nicknames like “Eater-X”, qualifying events across the country (13 this year), a separate women’s division, and the unveiling of a new professional sport, Major League Eating. ESPN has just extended its agreement to broadcast the event through 2024.

Companies wishing their marketing would stand out should take note. Yes, it’s safest to conservatively build and protect one’s reputation, and in some industries, such as pharma and healthcare, there’s little room to cross the line. But some executives are simply too timid, hoping their products and services will garner attention without a noteworthy media angle.

“At some companies there’s too much starch in their collars. It doesn’t mean you’re reckless and not mindful of preserving the brand,” said Richard Shea of his approach to marketing.

Just like Red Bull, masterful at promoting experience as much as product, Nathan’s Famous engages the public with its July 4th Hot Dog Eating Contest, which not only sets it apart from the competition, but also has it eating their lunch.

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