

Marketing Effectiveness Awards 2008
Category2: Communications Excellence Awards
B. Advertising Excellence

Title:

“How the Snowman took on Father Christmas (and won)”

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Background

AG Barr is a Glasgow-based soft drinks company whose broad portfolio of drinks brands includes Tizer, Orangina and, St Clements. But the jewel in the crown is IRN-BRU, traditionally accounting for two-thirds of the company's volume and, in recent times, 50% of the annual growth.

Most of this comes from Scotland which accounts for 72% of IRN-BRU sales. For AG BARR, a strong IRN-BRU performance in Scotland, particularly in the two big sales peaks for soft drinks – the summer and Christmas – is therefore a commercial imperative.

Tough times

IRN-BRU is part of Scottish culture and a brand with considerable public affection. But, it is also a brand under considerable threat mainly because IRN-BRU is an “other flavoured carbonate” (OFC) within a changing soft drinks sector.

Recently, within the soft drinks sector as a whole, OFCs have come under the most pressure as consumers move towards perceived healthier options – water, fruit juices – as well as energy drinks such as Lucozade.

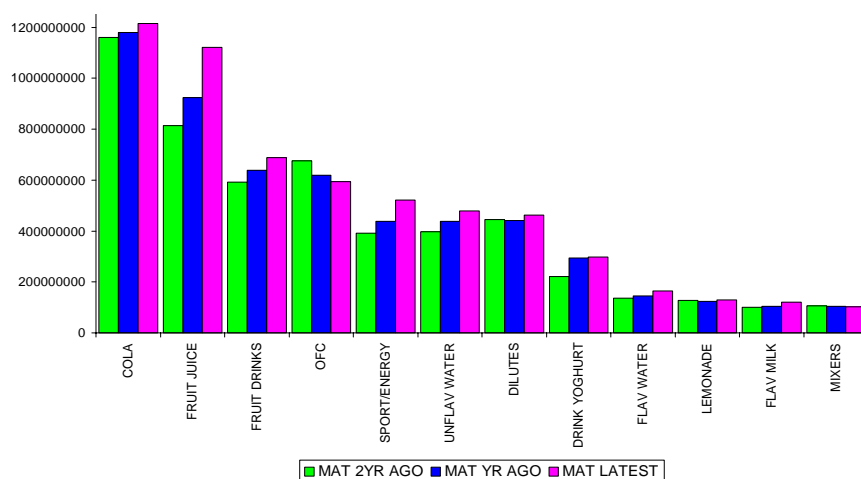


Chart 1: Soft drinks expenditure share of trade – MAT – total GB, AC Nielsen
cantrack data, January 2007

As this chart clearly shows, colas, fruit juices, fruit drinks, energy brands and waters are all growing whilst OFC's are declining steadily. The traditional IRN-BRU drinker is now faced with more choice than ever. IRN-BRU's cultural status in Scotland, therefore, has no longer become a guarantee of loyalty.

Under these changing and tougher conditions, and with a successful Christmas sales period a priority, AG BARR decided that, for the first time in their history, they should develop an IRN-BRU Christmas TV advertising campaign.

The advertising objectives

The objectives driving the Christmas advertising campaign for IRN-BRU were three fold:

1. To enhance IRN-BRU's stature and the public's affection for the brand
2. To reinforce existing drinkers' loyalty and win back lapsed users who have drifted into other soft drinks categories
3. To position IRN-BRU as an essential part of the Christmas festivities

A difficult challenge

IRN-BRU has a successful advertising legacy. However, achieving our objectives for a Christmas campaign posed a number of specific challenges.

Firstly, Coke have been advertising at Christmas since the 1930s. For many, the familiar 'Holidays are coming' jingle and epic TV ad featuring the brightly lit train, heralds the start of the Christmas season¹. In as much as an advertiser can, they 'owned' Christmas – they even changed the colour of Father Christmas' coat to match their bottle.

Secondly, our ad had to work hard in two distinct markets. The priority was to reinforce the Scottish drinkers' affection for the brand in Christmas 2006 with a view to rolling the ad out across the UK in Christmas 2007. We had to develop an ad which would tap into and enhance the Scot's affection for the brand but which would also appeal to an English audience, much less close to IRN-BRU.

¹ NDSI Mums Deep Dive Research, March 2005, Coca-Cola Enterprises Press Release 30.10.06



Thirdly, our ad had to appeal to a very wide audience age group. At Christmas, much of the volume comes from bulk buying from supermarkets. The Christmas advertising had to appeal to the drinkers (mainly teenagers and young adults) and the buyers (mums and dads). In short, we were aiming to win over the broad Scottish public. Once targeting gets this broad, striking a chord with an ad becomes a much harder task.

Finally, Christmas is cluttered advertising period. In 2006, M&S unveiled a spoof James Bond ad, Argos showed a father catching a star for his greedy son and Jamie Oliver entreated the nation to “spice up their Christmas” for Sainsbury’s. Coke was all set to launch a new epic, featuring Santa himself. Christmas ad fatigue and lack of cut-through were potential pitfalls for us.

Elf is in the building

To make sure that everyone was excited by the new challenge, we set up a creative briefing with a difference.

We decorated our briefing room with tinsel and fairy lights, wrapped selection boxes in Christmas paper and readied our chilled cans of IRN-BRU. Brand manager Joady and our account manager, Gail, dressed up as Christmas elves, courtesy of Joady’s mum’s sewing skills and delivered the brief with gusto. In the middle of June (a hot June too).

The message was clear – Have fun. Make the best and most talked about TV Christmas ad ever. Get into the spirit (if not the outfit).



The creative process

Over recent years IRN-BRU has established a campaign idea based around 'Phenomenal', a word which encapsulates the brand's extraordinary and indescribable nature. 'Phenomenal' TV advertising has a clear structure based around distraction: a drinker, so engrossed in the enjoyment of his/her IRN-BRU, fails to notice extraordinary/phenomenal things happening around them. All this was delivered with our IRN-BRU 'likeable maverick' (cheeky, funny) tone of voice.

Initially, we briefed the creatives to work within this formula, applied to Christmas settings and events.

The resulting scripts were OK but did not meet the expectations set by the colourful briefing itself. The problem was clear: the existing 'Phenomenal' advertising structure was more constraining than liberating.

We decided to open up the brief. We still aimed to make Christmas and IRN-BRU go hand in hand. We still wanted it to be funny, likeable and a little bit cheeky. But, we simplified the task by deciding that the ad didn't have to say that IRN-BRU was 'Phenomenal': rather the ad simply had to be phenomenal. It had to have scale.



“We’re walking in the air...”

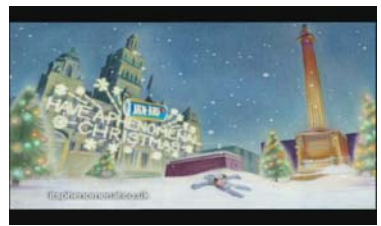
Most scripts never make it beyond the internal jury phase. But, there’s always a moment in a script review when everyone recognises that the script they are being presented is THE ONE. This moment came when a Leith Creative sang, in an alarmingly high pitched voice, an IRN-BRU version of “We’re walking in the air” from ‘The Snowman’.

The idea was perfect for a number of reasons:

- It tied IRN-BRU to a quintessential Christmas moment – watching ‘The Snowman’
- It was typically IRN-BRU in tone – cheeky, humorous and a little bit irreverent
- It had brand desire at the heart of the script – all The Snowman wanted was the boy’s IRN-BRU
- And, it had the scale we were looking for

Crucially, the core idea – The Snowman wants IRN-BRU so much that he drops the boy – would work in Scotland and England. We saw in the script, the opportunity to heighten the core Scottish audience’s identification with the ad by setting the action against a backdrop of well loved Scottish monuments. This meant that the ad would not only be high on entertainment, but there would also be another level of emotional engagement.





We're walking in the air, I'm sipping on an Irn-Bru, my chilly snowman mate said he would like some too.

I tell him get your own, he looks like he is going to cry, I tell him once again the Irn-Bru is mine.

Now I'm falling through the air, I wonder where I'm going to land. He nicked my Irn-Bru and let go of my hand.

NB: please refer to attached mpeg of "Snowman" ad

Media

The brand and the core idea merited the stature associated with a minute long ad.

The media agency set about buying TV spots targeting family viewing occasions over the Christmas period. We wanted the ad to be a real talking point so what better time to start these conversations than around family viewing?

At 9:45pm on Saturday 2 December, the ad launched in the adbreak of "An audience with Take That". Almost immediately, the A G Barr website was flooded with emails praising the new ad as "*utterly, utterly brilliant*".

Visuals from the ads were also emblazoned across IRN-BRU in-store packaging (see appendix).

We didn't have the budget in 2006 to support the TV with any further paid-for media (though the ad was supplemented in 2007 with strategically chosen 96 sheets) so we underpinned the launch with carefully planned PR.

PR Coverage

We wanted our advertising to get noticed and talked about. There was an instant buzz around our "Snowman" ad.





A quick google blog search neatly demonstrates the extent to which the new ad was embraced by the online community.

We got to 100,000 views within days of the ad being posted on Youtube. At the time of writing, 38 people have posted the ad on Youtube, the clip with the most hits has received 645,986 hits to date and collectively, more than 824,171² people have watched the ad.

"One of the best ads I've seen recently...It was talked about by me, friends and family."

"When I first saw it, I laughed my head off, I thought it was very funny and mentioned it to my friends."

"Promoted as a good Scottish drink, it was a very clever ad with great humour. My friends were talking about it at work."

"Loved it – not only was it a brilliant advert for IRN-BRU, it was fantastic for Scotland."

Respondent verbatims¹

² As of 28 January 2008

The results

In advertising terms, the Snowman ad was astonishingly successful. Tracking research suggested the ad had reached the broad audience we'd set out to speak to. Verified awareness reached 83%, on a par with the most popular ad ever aired by IRN-BRU until that point ("Grandad").

Such was the level of audience engagement that six out of ten of the research respondents described the snowman scenario in detail. There was almost universal agreement that the ad was different, attention grabbing and funny.

The Scottish context was particularly well-received:

"I live in Falkirk near the Falkirk Wheel so it was good to see this in the advert."

The maverick twist at the end of the ad was also fondly recalled:

*"A little boy flying with the snowman and the boy has a can of IRN-BRU that the snowman wants.
The snowman steals the can off the boy and lets go of him."*

*"The wee boy and the snowman are flying about Scotland and the snowman steals the wee boy's
IRN-BRU and drops him."*

Respondent verbatims¹

We wanted to win back lapsed users and the ad prompted re-appraisal.

*"It has changed my ideas about IRN-BRU somewhat, really liked the advert."
"IRN-BRU is one of the most fun brands about, all of their advertising has made me laugh, smile
and rethink their product. Fabulous!"*

Respondent verbatims¹

Finally, when it came to "stealing" Christmas from Coke, it seemed we'd also made headway there. When questioned about channels of communication, 92% of respondents recalled seeing IRN-BRU advertising on TV – in contrast to 88% of respondents for Coke.

We set out to create an ad that enhanced public affection for IRN-BRU. In the run up to New Year's Eve in 2007, STV asked viewers to vote for their all-time favourite TV ad. An astonishing 68% voted for our "Snowman" ad, beating off competition from the classic Hovis ad, the first PG Tips ad, Smash, Hamlet Cigars and the Guinness "Surfer" ad. A fine tribute to Scotland's affection for the Snowman.



Achieving our business objectives

Ads that cut through, make people laugh and get them talking are one thing. But did our audience's enjoyment of the ad actually translate into sales?

Looking at sales of IRN-BRU across 2006, there was a pronounced spike in sales that Christmas. Taking the highest performing week that summer, Christmas week outsold the summer peak by 6%. In volume terms, sales increased by an astonishing 19%.

Looking at IRN-BRU sales year on year, they increased marginally in the 12 weeks following the Christmas campaign³. However, remember that the OFC category was in consistent decline so IRN-BRU bucked the market trend. Other OFC brands (Lilt, Fanta and Tango) suffered and lost value share during the same period.

In the context of competitor spend levels, this looks even more impressive. Coke significantly outspent us for the whole of 2006, achieving 15% of the market share of voice across all media⁴. Our spend totalled barely half of that at 8%.

Sustained growth

The IRN-BRU brand delivered an increase in volume share of 4% nationally in 2006. Company turnover for 2006 showed a 10% increase year on year⁵.

Based on this strong performance, AG Barr announced an increase in the final dividend payment to shareholders of 10.2%.

Fast forward to a miserable summer and soft drinks were in an even worse predicament. Coke was in particularly dire straits, having lost 5.6% of their volume sales⁶.

IRN-BRU stood out as one of only two other OFCs that had achieved volume growth. Total IRN-BRU sales had increased in value by 3.6% and in volume by 1.9%.

A phenomenal performance from a humble Snowman.

³ AC Nielsen Scantrack Data to 27/01/07

⁴ Thomson Intermedia / Billetts, Jan – Dec 06, Scotland only

⁵ A G Barr Annual Report, January 2007

⁶ AC Nielsen Scantrack Data to 16/06/07



Summary

A successful Christmas for IRN-BRU is essential for AG BARR. But, Christmas is a crowded TV advertising period. Tasted to develop IRN-BRU's first ever Christmas ad, Leith rose to the challenge and created a classic, helping IRN-BRU buck the trend for OFC drinks and AG BARR go from strength to strength.

