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Insight & Strategy: Can't Touch This /

Cheetos

How a snack brand embraced and named its distinctive (messy) asset to launch a new product and connect with a bigger audience, winning a Grand Prix at this year's Cannes Lions

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbNBax8E7XM>

Last year, snack brand **Cheetos** launched a new popcorn product with a humorous Super Bowl ad that highlighted how the brand's iconic orange dust coating gets people out of bothersome tasks.

Working with creative agency **Goodby Silverstein & Partners** in San Francisco, the Frito-Lay brand set the groundwork for the activation in January 2020 with a tweet that christened its cheesy dust 'Cheetle'. A week later, the brand launched a teaser spot (below) ahead of the Super Bowl starring rapper MC Hammer.

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KckuPVU1XY>

The teaser suggests that the singer's signature song **Can't Touch This** is inspired by the Cheetos dust as he can't play his piano after munching on the snack.

During the Super Bowl on 2 February 2020, Cheetos launched the full ad, which features a man avoiding various tasks due to the Cheetle on his fingertips, while MC Hammer appears throughout, chiming in with 'Can't Touch This'.

Results / According to the agency, **twice** the amount of popcorn was sold versus the initial forecast, while Cheetos' overall sales increased by **13%**. The Can't Touch This campaign also resulted in **4 billion** media impressions and won a Grand Prix in Creative Strategy during the 2021 Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.



We caught up with **Rachel Ferdinando**, senior vice president and chief marketing officer of Frito-Lay North America. As well as **Eamonn Dixon**, creative director at Goodby Silverstein & Partners, and **Ralph Paone**, group strategy director at the agency. They told us:

- In 2019, Cheetos' penetration and market share was in decline. The brand needed to expand its appeal beyond its focus on family-fun occasions
- The popcorn category is dominated by two types of brands: health and wellness, and indulgence – neither of which was suitable for Cheetos
- The orange dust that collects on people's fingers is the brand's distinctive asset and is the foundation of Cheetos' new creative strategy
- The key to the success of the campaign was to take a consumer insight and inject some fun and mischief into the spot that appealed to a younger audience

Can you give me an overview of the brand?

Rachel Ferdinando: Cheetos has been around for several decades and it has an incredibly strong fan base – it's a snack unlike any other. In 2019, we started assessing what the future was for the brand; we discovered that penetration was starting to plateau and our share was being impacted, it was a pivot point. Quite honestly, we also knew that we had only been scratching the surface of what the brand could be – there was so much more potential. So, we set ourselves the task of answering two simple questions: how do we unleash this brand and what's our ambition for it?

Did you do any research to help answer these questions?

Ferdinando: We found that there was an incredible amount of love for the brand and that we weren't necessarily reflecting that or what made it so special and unique. We found stories online of people bathing in Cheetos, making shapes out of Cheetos – so many powerful points of inspiration. Above all, there was a playfulness and sense of mischievousness that people associated with the brand.



Who is the brand's target audience?

Ferdinando: For years, we've focused on millennial parents, which was fruitful. But there's no doubt that it eventually pigeon-holed Cheetos into a family snack brand. When we did the research, we found that while the family-fun occasion is relevant, it was only representative of half of Cheetos buyers. We really wanted to grow more aggressively and get awareness back up so we had to get Cheetos beyond its narrow occasion focus and look for an insight that was relevant to a much bigger audience.

And what insight did you find?

Ferdinando: What we realised is that the Cheetos experience is distinct, it commands attention. We discovered that for our customers it's not about the vehicle, it's about the experience of eating the product and getting that cheesy dust all over your fingers. So we asked ourselves how we could expand that experience to reach a broader audience.

So, what was the brief for the campaign? What were the challenges?

Ralph Paone: The brief existed within that larger context of unlocking more potential for the brand and finding a way to continue growth. More specifically, we were tasked with launching the brand's biggest innovation to date: Cheetos Popcorn. When we looked at the popcorn category, there were two opposing types of brands: big brands that looked like Instagram startups that focused on health, wellness and clean design, etc, and then very indulgent brands like chocolate popcorn – Cheetos didn't fit into either of those things.

Instead, we needed to find a way to introduce this product into the category that would distinguish it from those players but also draw popcorn eaters to the brand. We asked ourselves how we could take the spirit of Cheetos and create this new subcategory. But we didn't want this to be a one-off launch. We wanted it to become a larger platform for Cheetos that starts with its distinctive product attribute of the orange dust.

By focusing on a product feature that stretches across the Cheetos brand and an insight that is true of its fans, we've created a brand platform that has endless iterations built from that distinctive asset

Ralph Paone, Goodby Silverstein & Partners



You mentioned that you're looking to appeal to a wider audience. Who are you targeting with this campaign?

Ferdinando: We're looking at that younger segment. They are what we call the 'rejuvenal' – these people have a desire to be free from the stresses of adulting with responsibilities and, quite frankly, the seriousness of life. They are looking for ways to rejuvenate themselves by adding moments of play and breaking up the routine of the day, which Cheetos plays perfectly to.

What goals were set? What metrics were used to measure whether you achieved them or not?

Ferdinando: The most important metric for this campaign was if it resonated with our fans. We saw on social that consumers really connected to the idea and that they thought it reflected the truth of the brand. The other measurement of success was if the new creative strategy provided us with a sustainable path forward. Could we extend it and use it in different ways? Again, it certainly ticked the box in that regard. The popcorn innovation also received the highest sales for a new product that we've seen in a decade, which was great.

Did you do any research to help inform the direction of the campaign?

Paone: We did a lot of interviews with people in their 20s about Cheetos and also crawled through subreddit threads, Twitter, etc to uncover all the truths about how the product was used and what they think of the brand. By doing that, we noticed something about Cheetos that we hadn't seen before, which was that people didn't just love the orange dust because it was delicious and cheesy. It was also a way to get out of things. You would see people tweet things like, 'When I'm done procrastinating, I'll open a bag of Cheetos so that I can't do anything else.' For them, it wasn't just a flavour. It was almost like a way to access freedom from responsibility. We decided to lean into that distinctive feature and use that to bring new people into the fold.



What role did naming the Cheetos dust play in the campaign?

Ferdinando: It's always been the official name of the dust internally and we just joined the dots. It wasn't something that we had leveraged before, but once we uncovered the strategy to use this unique and distinctive asset, we knew we had to have a name for it. That's where the two came together.

Eamonn Dixon: We wanted to drum up excitement leading up to the Super Bowl spot in a sort of Hansel and Gretel breadcrumb way. The first phase was announcing the official name of the dust on Twitter through Cheetos' mascot Chester. The idea was to put the name out there and make Cheetos the centre of conversation. And it worked – people as far away as Australia and Japan were even discussing the revelation.

Is it correct that you used a 'Cheetle artist' on set? What did they do exactly?

Dixon: Yes – we have a very talented guy that we call the Chip Wrangler. He's essential on all the commercials and experiences that we do across Frito-Lay but particularly for Cheetos. It's definitely an art form! Not only does it have to look real, but that distinctive asset is the main character in some respect so we spend a lot of time on set making sure that it's perfect.

This was Cheetos' first Super Bowl ad in 11 years (see video below). What convinced the brand to return?

Ferdinando: This was the biggest innovation in a decade, and when I saw the creative strategy and idea, I knew that we needed a big stage and the right cultural moment to unleash it. At Frito-Lay, we say that we're not in the business of snacking; we're in the business of delivering joy. When you think about the joy that surrounds this event, it absolutely aligns and there was no better place to do it.

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpzVE1mV44Y>

By discovering Cheetos' distinctive asset, isolating it and then bravely moving ahead at 100 miles an hour, we were able to capture attention at an unprecedented level.

Eamonn Dixon, Goodby Silverstein & Partners

How did choosing to run a Super Bowl ad affect the way that you approached the campaign?

Paone: I think that's what helped us take the entire thing to the next level. It definitely elevated the creative bar – we weren't just making an ad, it had to compete on the Super Bowl stage. The 'Big Game' is such a unique moment when people actually want to see ads that day so you have to meet that expectation.

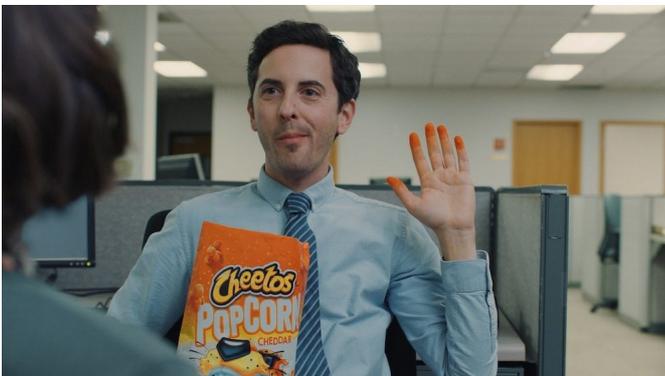
What tone were you looking to strike with the ad?

Dixon: What we've been trying to do is take a real insight that people can relate to and then give it a ridiculous twist that makes it fun, silly and leans into that 'rejuvenal' mindset.

Ferdinando: The tone was also a core part of the campaign. We wanted to take seriousness and inject play or take something normative and be mischievous with it. What we looked really closely at when we made the spot was what scenarios would be the most humorous and entertain people?

How did you maintain the noise around the campaign post the Super Bowl? Was it important to spread the media?

Dixon: After we announced the popcorn, we wanted to expose the innovation to as many people as possible. We had out-of-home hand painted with the Cheetle dust, we had a TikTok challenge where people could reenact the commercial themselves, we had a Google Chrome extension that could recognise the dust on people's fingers and unlock new content, etc. We continued to tell the Cheetle story throughout the year.



What challenges did you face along the way?

Ferdinando: Whenever you have a major shift in strategy, you have to think about what it means for the existing fan base and the internal organisation of the brand. The other thing was that we didn't have the legacy at the Super Bowl that say Doritos has. We had to make sure that when we came back, we came back the right way.

Tell us about the results.

Ferdinando: Winning the Grand Prix for Creative Strategy at Cannes was pretty special. But, from a KPI perspective, we doubled the sales forecast. It was also the number one performing 30-second ad on Ad Meter [an annual survey that rates the popularity of Super Bowl ads] and number 10 on it overall.

How does this campaign benefit Cheetos' long-term brand strategy?

Paone: The campaign wasn't just about launching the popcorn product although that's obviously what we were setting out to do. It was about taking an enduring asset of the Cheetos brand, which is the Cheetle, and turning it into a badge of pride for people who are already fans while making other people feel like they want to join in with the mischief-makers of the world. By focusing on a product feature that stretches across the Cheetos brand and an insight that is true of its fans, we've created a brand platform that has endless iterations built from that distinctive asset.

What has been your single greatest learning from this campaign?

Ferdinando: The power of insight to drive breakthrough creative strategy. It's a reminder that you can't achieve creative excellence without studying your consumers and unleashing that in your communications.

Dixon: So many brands struggle to find their distinctive asset. By discovering Cheetos' distinctive asset, isolating it and then bravely moving ahead at 100 miles an hour, we were able to capture attention at an unprecedented level.

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