

Tackling the
Big CMO
Challenges

Drew Neisser

Expert Blogger
FastCompany.com

Content Editor
The CMO Club

THE 1 2 1/2 STEP RECIPE FOR CMO SUCCESS



Terri Funk Graham
Former CMO, Jack in the Box
Chairman of The President's
Circle, The CMO Club

If Truman Capote was right that “failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor,” then you’re in for a feast as I contrast the typical shortcomings of your average CMO with the amazing success of **Terri Funk Graham**. As CMO of Jack in the Box, Graham cooked up the outrageously successful “Jack” campaign that began its 18-year run of driving sales and building loyalty. And like the recipes of many world-class chefs, Graham’s is easy-to-digest but hard-to-replicate.

1. Whisk in the Risk

Having the courage to take a risk is table stakes for CMOs. In Graham’s case, Jack in the Box “needed to do something to revitalize the brand and make it relevant again” after enduring a food poisoning crisis. So in 1995, Graham helped initiate the Bringing Jack Back campaign, which launched with spokesperson Jack undergoing plastic surgery and taking merciless revenge on the board of directors. This initial risk born of necessity, was a mere taste of Graham’s on-going willingness to “put a lot more on the line.”

2. Have a Heart

Despite evidence that consumer preference is emotionally driven, many CMOs focus entirely on the rational side of their brand. In contrast, Graham credits the longevity of the Jack campaign to the fact that they “tapped into the emotional branding side that really gave it a personality that people could connect to.” Adds Graham, “We were unapologetic about using humor, since it wasn’t going to hurt the brand as long as we were true to who we were.”



3. Don’t Cook by Committee

Though strong agency partners are often behind the initial big idea, it takes masterminds on both sides to keep the other potential cooks out of the proverbial kitchen over the long run. Graham credits Secret Weapon Creative Director Dick Sittig for “rising to the challenge of keeping Jack relevant.” Graham held up her end of the bargain, proclaiming, “Approval by committee is the death of a campaign—you end up with mediocre work.”

“We were unapologetic about using humor, since it wasn’t going to hurt the brand as long as we were true to who we were.”

4. A Tablespoon of Trust

No CMO can succeed without the trust of their CEO. Explains Graham, “Linda Lang (CEO of Jack in the Box) absolutely let me run with it [the Jack campaign], and she always backed it.” However, while Graham “had full support and permission to take risks,” her CEO expected her to “stand tall” if a crisis arose. This meant that Graham “would have to do all the explaining in the boardroom any time something went a little astray”—a reasonable quid pro quo for this kind of freedom.

5. Nothing Tastes Better Than Sales

Some marketers make a distinction between brand-driving and sales-driving ads, only holding the latter accountable. Graham considers such an approach a luxury Jack in the Box can’t afford, since they are constantly outspent 10:1 by McDonalds. “Everything that we did we also did with the premise of generating sales and driving traffic,” explains Graham. “We didn’t do funny ads just for the sake of doing funny ads: our goal was always to drive traffic and that’s what we accomplished each and every time,” she adds.

6. Make the Menu

Like the world-class chef who goes to the market to hand pick her ingredients, a master CMO like Graham did not want to be handcuffed by a product controlled by others. So for the last five years, “Menu” reported to Graham because, as she puts it, “we were able to have the true insight as to what the product was delivering to the customer.” The added value of having Product report to Marketing is that “everybody is in sync and it is all tied to an overall strategy,” concludes Graham.

7. Spread the Word Inside

Sometimes the internal audience can be as important as the customer to the CMO, especially when a product problem needs to be addressed. For Graham, the problem turned out to be their signature taco, Jack's best-selling product that had been "marginalized and optimized over time," losing both taste and fans along the way. To fix this, Graham launched the "Respect the Taco" initiative, which renewed internal focus on product quality and gave it the sales driving "attention it deserved."

8. Flavor It with Fresh

Most established brands walk the knife's edge between being a reliable staple and yesterday's leftovers. To combat this, Graham recognized early on that "in the quick-serve restaurant business, news is what drives traffic." Consequently, she used advertising to promote new products, line extensions and product bundles. The need for CMOs to deliver news via all their communications goes well beyond the QSR world. Graham remarks, "We all like to try new things—it's human nature."

9. Pander to Your Patrons

The relentless search for incremental sales can lead any adventurous CMO astray. In the pursuit of innovation, Graham cautions, "There comes a point when you're starting to put products out there that are so far afield that your core customer starts to question your brand." Graham cited Jack's Southwest Bowl as a line extension that was too far off-track, while a product like the Sourdough Ultimate Cheeseburger "was more in the sweet spot and more aligned with the focus of our biggest fans."

10. Stir the Pot

Typically, even the best campaigns lose steam over time. Aware that after 14 years, Jack's time might be up, Graham put "the biggest brand equity that the company had on the line to see if people still cared." In a Super Bowl spot, Jack got hit by a bus. And rather than a typical media schedule, the commercial ran just the one time, at which point digital and social media took over. Customers responded famously: "[They] sent cards, teddy bears, flowers and everything you could imagine for Jack's recovery," gushes Graham.

11. Avoid Relying on the Course d'Jour

When it comes to media selection, newish CMOs may be inclined to dismiss television as a dinosaur. Having witnessed the power of TV year after year, Graham knows better and warns, "The notion that traditional media is dead is quite false." That said, Graham also evangelizes about the synergistic power of digital and social, two channels that gave Jack's bus accident recovery a life of its own after the YouTube video went viral and hatched a campaign within a campaign.

"We didn't do funny ads just for the sake of doing funny ads: our goal was always to drive traffic and that's what we accomplished each and every time."

“The notion that traditional media is dead is quite false.”

12. Read the Tea Leaves

With the advent of so-called “Big Data,” no CMO can afford to rely entirely on his or her gut. And though Graham abhors copy testing as a means of selecting creative, her annual plan included “a number of studies (both quantitative and qualitative) that would give us indicators on how we were doing.” Since “the message was always tied around a product,” Graham notes, “it was pretty straightforward for us to tell that the campaign was driving those product sales.”

12½. Another Cup of Chutzpah, Please

Inevitably, most CMOs will find themselves in a crisis, but few will have the courage to diffuse the situation quite like Graham. After airing a TV spot that featured a hallucinating young man who ordered 30 tacos (an experience that resonated with Jack’s core target), Graham got wind that “protesters and media were planning to show up on the grass all around our corporate headquarters.” Her solution? “We became a water park in the afternoon and turned on the sprinklers,” dowsing the protest before it started. Now that’s chutzpah!

Final Note: After a 22-year run at Jack in the Box, Terri Funk Graham recently joined the Board of Directors at Hot Topic Inc. and is working with The CMO Club as the Chairwoman of its President’s Circle and consulting for HOM Sotheby’s Realty. For more about Terri and her experience at Jack in the Box, feel free to read our in-depth interview on TheDrewBlog.com.



About the author

Drew Neisser is the CEO and founder of Renegade, the NYC-based social media & marketing agency that helps inspired CMO’s cut through. He is the champion of Marketing as Service, a philosophy he espouses in his writings on FastCompany.com, PSFK, TheDrewBlog and [The Cut](http://TheCut), a much-appreciated monthly newsletter. If you have a CMO success story to tell, let Drew know at dneisser@renegade.com.