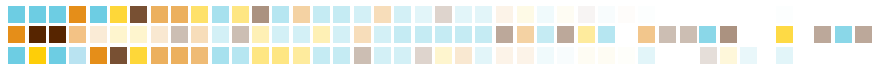


PERSPECTIVES



A monthly look at what's happening in the ever-changing digital world and beyond.



From the Editor



Welcome back to *Perspectives!*, the collection of one-page articles on digital trends and the implications they have for the marketing world. This month we honor The Fool as we take a look at some April Fool's Day jokes corporations use to boost their marketing efforts.

Practical jokes can be used to indoctrinate members into an exclusive club and create brand affinity. By satirizing basic human fears (the fake pop-out snake in a canister of peanuts), we can tap into deep emotions of anger and embarrassment that can lead to a greater understanding of

self-awareness, while creating some love for the brand that made us the butt of the joke in the first place. Of course, the joke has to be a good one. The words in a 2008 *The New York Times* article express it best. "Keep it above the belt, stop short of total humiliation and, if possible, mix in some irony, some drama, maybe even a bogus call from the person's old flame or new boss."¹

We are available to discuss or delve deeper into any of the topics presented here. What you will read in this one-page format is just a taste of the thought leadership going on at RTC Relationship Marketing. To engage us, you can join the conversation online on our website's Sparkblog and on SlideShare (contact info listed below), or send me an email letting me know your thoughts. Additionally, custom briefings are available on any topic in this edition. If you're a client, just contact your Project Manager or Account Manager; otherwise, contact me and we'll work something out. For an ongoing conversation with loads of personality, visit *Treffpunkt*—RTC Relationship Marketing's Digital Integration and Innovations team blog—at <http://rtctreffpunkt.blogspot.com/>.

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Photos courtesy of Flickr Creative Commons : P.1: *US Navy* by DeusXFlorida, 2009
P.2: *fancy salted mixed nuts* by Ralph Hockens, 2008

¹ April Fool! The Purpose of Pranks, *The New York Times*, Benedict Carey, April 1 2008: <http://tiny.cc/oyvmh>



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Twitter Lessons from the Bronx Zoo Cobra & Ryan Seacrest

Summary: April Fool's Day (AFD) 2011 was rich with fake product announcements, clever website tweaks, and crafty specials. One joke that stood out for its calculated use of Twitter, timeliness, and depth of experience was the Bronx Zoo Cobra "taking over" Ryan Seacrest's Twitter feed. It capitalized on buzz surrounding the cobra's disappearance from the Bronx Zoo and the subsequent @BronxZoosCobra Twitter feed.

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Digital Integration and Innovation

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Key Information

It would be hard to find two more radically different Twitter accounts than those belonging to Ryan Seacrest and the Bronx Zoo Cobra. Ryan Seacrest has 4.2 million Twitter followers, putting him in the top 20 of most-followed Twitter accounts.¹ As host of *American Idol* and producer of reality programs like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Seacrest falls squarely within mainstream entertainment. @BronxZoosCobra is the "spoof" Twitter account for the cobra that escaped from the Bronx Zoo in March; it has attracted 236,478 followers. The account is not affiliated with the Bronx Zoo and the identity of the owner has not been revealed. The cobra's posts appeal to a cheeky, ironic, clever sense of humor.

Visitors to Ryan Seacrest's Twitter page on April 1 were greeted by the following message: "Seacrest out! @BronxZoosCobra in! I'm hijacking Ryan's Twitter & fixed his website. It didn't kick enough s." Over the course of the day, the cobra posted more than a dozen tweets on Seacrest's account and posted links to snake-oriented content such as "5 Do's and Don'ts for Dating a Cobra" on ryanseacrest.com.

Implications and Action Items

The Bronx Zoo Cobra's takeover of Ryan Seacrest's Twitter account offers lessons on how to use Twitter to do something unexpected, expand your audience, be authentic, and generate buzz.

- **Be willing to do something unexpected for your brand** – Not everyone is a fan of Ryan Seacrest and his "vanilla" image. His decision to partner with the cobra for an AFD joke was totally unexpected and demonstrates that he doesn't take himself too seriously and is a very shrewd businessman.
- **Build your audience** – Ryan Seacrest, the cobra, and the Bronx Zoo benefitted from all of the attention their AFD joke received. People who would normally not follow Seacrest's Twitter account now monitor his Tweets. @BronxZoosCobra has moved beyond a niche phenomenon. The Bronx Zoo may be the biggest winner since it was not affiliated with the joke but has benefitted from all of the free publicity.
- **Authenticity** – @BronxZooCobra has a distinct "voice" – the humorous Tweets effortlessly weave in references to pop culture (Prison Break, Harry Potter, SOAP) and NYC locales. The cobra takeover of @RyanSeacrest preserved the unique style with Tweets such as "I've an entertainment scoop even Ryan doesn't know about. I have a show coming: 'Animal Planet: Snake On The Town' <http://bit.ly/hDNq8c>." The link pointed to RyanSeacrest.com, which had been also been taken over with cobra-centric content. The thoroughness and attention to detail that was paid to present a robust and believable AFD joke serves as a great example to any company considering how to implement a multi-platform campaign.
- **Create buzz** – A successful AFD joke not only attracts attention on the actual day but generates ongoing interest in the personality or company so that people will continue to follow them. The Bronx Zoo capitalized on the joke by promoting a Name the Cobra contest (the winning name is Mia). @BronxZooCobra continues to Tweet about life back in the zoo and is adding more followers every day.



¹ Twitaholic: <http://tiny.cc/vurdm>

April Fool's as Product Testing? It's No Joke

Summary: April Fool's jokes can easily go from clever marketing ploys to an integrated part of product testing and development. ThinkGeek is an online retailer known for their April Fool's jokes, and eventually bringing the most popular to market. Take a look at this year's jokes and see what the next trend in the geek-set might be.

Carlen Lea Lesser, VP/Director
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Connector of people, ideas and info. Marketer, geek, blogger, baker, tea drinker, NPR junkie and artist. @carlenlea

Key Information

ThinkGeek is an online and catalogue retailer that was born at the height of the original Internet boom in 1999. The company sells geeky things for geeky people, or as they put it "stuff for smart masses." ThinkGeek has a long history¹ of April Fool's jokes, and has long discovered that for them it's also a way of testing interest in potential new products. In particular, in 2009 they promoted a "Star Wars Tauntaun Sleeping Bag" that they saw incredible interest in, and it soon became available as an actual product. In 2010, ThinkGeek received mainstream press coverage for one of their April Fool's jokes because it earned them a Cease and Desist letter from the pork lobby. The fake product in question was called "canned unicorn meat," and they used the trademarked slogan "the other white meat." The product, sans slogan, did appear as an actual product several months later.

The first product they brought to market based on demand from the April Fool's jokes was the "1up Mushroom Kit"², in 2006 – five years after they began the fake product jokes. In recent years, ThinkGeek has formalized the use of April Fool's gag products as a way to judge interest in potential new products. When they first began listing products they could certainly track how many people visited those pages, and how many people attempted to purchase the products. Now on April Fool's gag product pages, when you click on "buy this" you not only receive a page that tells you it was a joke, but it also contains a listing of all the current gags, and the ability to vote for the ones you would like to see brought to market³.

This year's jokes tapped into some key digital trends, and it is easy to see which might come to market in the next few months. In particular, the Angry Birds green pork rinds snack is one that I would expect to see available for purchase soon, as the game seems to be reaching a fairly high level of awareness and ubiquity well beyond the traditional geekerati. Another favorite seems to be the Apple Store Playmobil set. Due to Apple's strict control over their brand, I doubt this one will come to market, but you never know.

Implications & Action Items

Brands can learn a lot from the ThinkGeek April Fool's gags.

- **Trend Watching:** If you aren't ready to use April Fool's gags for product testing, just keeping an eye on which products ThinkGeek brings to market will help you understand some of the consumer trends and memes that may be influencing your customers.
- **Integrate the Brand Mission:** April Fool's is the perfect day to show a little personality. ThinkGeek has an irreverent personality, and the fake products were a perfect fit for their core mission.
- **Capitalize on the Unexpected:** You never know when an April Fool's joke or anything else may bring you unexpected attention. Be sure you are ready and able to respond and make the most of unexpected attention and press.



¹ ThinkGeek's Archive of April Fool's Joke Products: <http://tiny.cc/l8vg5>

² ThinkGeek's 1up Mushroom, April Fool's Joke to actual product: <http://tiny.cc/1m4vc>

³ ThinkGeek April Fool's with product voting feature: <http://tiny.cc/892q7>

Rebecca Black Gets the Last Laugh

Summary: For April Fool’s, the comedy site “Funny or Die” redesigned their home page to focus entirely on teenage Internet sensation Rebecca Black and her song “Friday.” Although Black has drawn criticism and ridicule for the song online, she was able to get in on the joke and have a voice because the site takeover was timely, went into depth, and featured her participation.

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Digital Integration and Innovation

Floridian Hoya. Enhancing communication between companies and people thru social media, online communities, and cupcakes. Lots of cupcakes. @michellefares

Key Information

On April 1, 2011, visitors to comedy site “Funny or Die” noticed a significant site redesign – the home page featured video and image content entirely focused on 14-year-old singer Rebecca Black, who had achieved worldwide fame only a few weeks earlier with her unintentionally comically terrible music video “Friday.”

The low-budget video was produced by an independent music recording studio and uploaded to YouTube in February. A month later it went viral, becoming the most-discussed topic on Twitter and the subject of intense debate on message boards and social network sites. Although the song has garnered 82.5 million YouTube views and was the 13th most-downloaded song on iTunes¹ as of April 4th, there have been many negative reviews. Millions of people have derided the ridiculous lyrics such as “yesterday was Thursday Thursday/ today it is Friday Friday” and “Fun, fun, think about fun/You know what it is” and called the heavily auto-tuned singing and music video “terrible.”²



The “Funny or Die” spoof allowed Black to respond to the criticism in a lighthearted way. For April Fool’s, the site took her music seriously and created mock videos that analyzed the lyrics, a special offer to buy her “greatest hits” album for \$79.99, and a “Betwixt the Music” feature (a play on VH1’s “Behind the Music” show). The teenager starred in the videos and explained in interviews that the lyrics are really about “consumerism,” “American foreign policy,” and “the broken promises to a generation.”

Black’s participation in the joke demonstrated how media-savvy she is at a very young age. As a “digital native” and a member of Generation Z, she was able to cope with criticism and scrutiny that older generations would not, and also fire back in kind to get the last laugh.

To see the original video for “Friday” on YouTube, visit <http://bit.ly/gn4mWP>. To see the “Funny or Die” spoofs, go to <http://bit.ly/dOcWWz>.

Implications & Action Items

By creating a great joke, “Funny or Die” gave Rebecca Black a say in the controversy going on around her and allowed her to make fun of herself. This joke was successful for several reasons:

1. **Participation:** Black proved that she has enough self-awareness to make fun of herself by participating in the videos and discussing her song lyrics with a straight face.
2. **Timeliness:** By moving quickly to produce this content only two weeks after the video became massively popular, “Funny or Die” took advantage of the singer’s relevance. And Rebecca Black was able to contribute to the joke while she is still a hot topic of conversation.
3. **Depth:** “Funny or Die” didn’t just change their home page; they actually produced 5–10 videos and images around the song. The depth of the joke encouraged users to spend time on the site and share with friends.

¹ ChaCha.com: <http://tiny.cc/4gcfg>

² BBC Newsbeat: <http://tiny.cc/o5vyf>

Coffee, Scooters and Strategy—the Starbucks Way

Summary: Starbucks' April Fool's joke, Mobile Pour, provided busy customers with the option to order coffee from their phone and have the coffee delivered to them enroute via baristas on scooters. While scooters are entertaining, the concept of deliver-on-the-go is not without possibility. Not only is it physically feasible, it aligns well with the Starbucks brand. Convenience, expedience and service are common themes evident in Starbucks' strategy, ones that often set them apart from other retailers.

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Years of planning, prodding & implementing digital stuff. Philadelphia born 'n' raised. Geeky, athletic and green. Go Big Red!

Key Information

The best April Fool's jokes are the ones that are off-beat, but have enough sensibility to make you wonder if they are real. Take Starbucks Mobile Pour¹, for example. Defined as baristas on scooters who bring mobile orders to customers on the go, Mobile Pour seems both absurd and yet doable. Why shouldn't people be able to log a coffee order on their walk to work? With mobile credit cards and mobile location targeting, it is technically possible. There are, of course, some physical limitations—scooters are not really that fast and there is always the spillage issue, but the idea is theoretically implementable.

Another reason this concept works is because it plays easily alongside Starbucks' strategy of practical and emotional customer service. Known for convenience (mobile apps and billing), speed (quick coffee lines and pre-paid cards) and listening (MyStarbuckIdea.com, Facebook and Twitter), Starbucks sets itself apart from competitors by playing into its customers' work and technology-oriented lifestyles. By developing an April Fool's joke that is not only feasible, but also one that does not diverge from its well-established brand strategy, Starbucks has presented an idea that may one day become reality.² Well, maybe minus the scooters.



Implications & Action Items

Starbucks' approach to customers, demonstrated through its customer-friendly Mobile Pour April Fool's joke, presents core concepts for successful brand-to-customer relationships. These concepts are applicable to most industries, demographics and brands, and can be categorized into three main mantras:

- **Prioritize user experience:** Consider implementing the shortest consumer journey when developing campaigns, tactics and technology. Customers want expedited brand interaction, whether online or in-store. No one likes waiting or inefficient processes. From accepting pre-paid cards to taking your coffee order before you reach the register, Starbucks looks for ways to make its customers' journey super efficient.
- **Take advantage of technology:** Starbucks knows its customers well and supplies them with apps and cross-technology synergies that align with the customers' technology usage patterns. First learn how tech-savvy your audience is, and then design apps, widgets, and kiosks that meet their needs.
- **Listen to the people:** Consider ways in which your brand can learn from your customers. Starbucks does a great job of listening and interacting with its people. Through MyStarbuckIdea.com, Facebook and Twitter, Starbucks solicits customer feedback and creates one-to-one and one-to-many relationships.

¹ Starbucks blog: <http://tiny.cc/sjdg>

² The Huffington Post: <http://tiny.cc/wzgzk1>

Petite Lap Giraffe, DIRECTV Has It

Summary: On April 1, Sokoblovsky Farms, the only breeders of petite lap giraffes (PLGs) launched its website. Since then over 710,000 people have signed up to be on the waiting list for their very own miniature giraffe. Unfortunately, the website and, more disappointingly, PLGs, were an elaborate April Fool's Day prank orchestrated by DIRECTV that tied perfectly into their current TV campaign for the satellite provider's premium package.

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Key Information

In August 2010, DIRECTV debuted a new TV spot promoting the network's premium package. The spot, aptly titled "Opulence¹," features Gregor, a wealthy Russian, strolling through his gold-covered mansion filled with scantily clad supermodels and burly bodyguards as he touts, in heavily accented English, DIRECTV's five free months of premium service. At the end of the spot, Gregor splays out on his gold couch, switches on his DIRECTV with a gold remote control, and turns to his right to bestow an affectionate kiss on an adorable miniature giraffe.



Gregor, and the giraffe, returned to TV in March with TV spot "Epic Win²." Gregor again touts DIRECTV's premium package, while "working out" in his gilded gym by electronically harnessing the bicep curls of a professional weight lifter. The giraffe trots next to Gregor on a miniature treadmill, gets handed his own mini gym towel and to close the spot receives an air kiss from Gregor.



Stemming from the spot's word-of-mouth, direct feedback, and inquiries about the mini-giraffe, for April Fool's Day, DIRECTV launched a website for Sokoblovsky Farms³, the best and only breeders of petite lap giraffes. The site features a live giraffe-cam in which bull Vladimir can be seen roaming the farm and occasionally eating and sleeping. Site visitors can learn more about PLGs: what they eat, if they get along with children, how big they grow, whether they are indoor or outdoor pets, and their grooming requirements (a weekly bubble bath in purified water). All of this content is written in broken, Russian-accented English and ties perfectly to the TV spots. On the site, the name of Gregor's PLG, Ivanka, is finally revealed, and as Ivanka is now a big celebrity Sokoblovsky Farms has posted the DIRECTV commercials. If visitors are interested in their very own PLG, they have to join a waiting list which is, as of April 11, 810,000-plus people long. In the meantime, though, you can share that you're on the waiting list with your family and friends on Twitter and Facebook. Should visitors dial the 1-800 number, the story continues with a voicemail recording from Sokoblovsky Farm.

Implications

DIRECTV's Sokoblovsky Farm's website prank is well conceived and executed. It's funny and engaging, extends the brand's marketing efforts, and is successful because of the following reasons:

- **Extendibility:** The website allows DIRECTV to extend a popular character (the PLG) from its TV commercial and campaign, and test its viability and recognition outside of the spot. The popularity, buzz, and engagement of the website confirms for DIRECTV that their commercials are having an impact by catching the eyeballs of consumers and leaving an impression.
- **Plausibility:** The Sokoblovsky Farm website works because, like good April Fool's Day jokes, its premise walked that fine line between reality and fantasy. People already keep mini-horses, dwarf rabbits, and teacup pigs as pets, so why not mini-giraffes?
- **Harnesses WOM:** DIRECTV's prank tapped into organic conversations (both online and offline) consumers were already having about the mini-giraffe (and how OMG snorgle-rific it is!!!) and created a campaign that played on this naturally occurring discussion. Judging from the comments on Cuteoverload.com's Facebook page⁴, users were genuinely disappointed to learn that PLGs were an April Fool's Day prank.

¹ DIRECTV's 'Opulence' ad is rich in subtleties: <http://tiny.cc/k3rww>

² DIRECTV's opulence czar flexes his 'epic win': <http://tiny.cc/i1mkd>

³ Russia's Finest Purveyors of Petite Lap Giraffes: <http://tiny.cc/a5g3d>

⁴ Cuteoverload's Facebook Page: <http://tiny.cc/dzrnk>



About RTCRM

RTC Relationship Marketing (RTCRM) is a full-service direct marketing and relationship marketing agency based in Washington, D.C., in the heart of Georgetown, with an additional office in New York. RTCRM boasts more than 40 years' worth of innovative, targeted solutions that grow its clients' brands and help them forge lasting, valuable relationships with their customers. What distinguishes RTCRM is its unique ability to analyze data and research on both a rational and emotional level. RTCRM's clients include major brands in the telecom, technology, pharmaceutical, and other business sectors such as AARP, BlackRock, Eli Lilly, and Novo Nordisk.

To learn more about RTCRM, please visit www.rtcrm.com or follow the Twitter feed @rtcrm.

About the Digital Integration and Innovation Team

The RTCRM Digital Integration and Innovation team is tasked with keeping track and making sense of the ever-changing digital world. It's our job to understand the nuances of how and why different types of people use technology and what that tells us about them. More importantly, it's our job to help our clients apply this knowledge to better communicate with their customers. We help clients translate business goals into marketing campaigns that build relationships with customers. In the 21st century, understanding how and why someone uses technology is as important as understanding where they live, what gender they are, and how old they are. That's where we come in. From ensuring that technographics are considered in the research phase, to tactical plans that align digital, print and broadcast tactics, we work with clients and internal partners to make sure it all works.

It's not about what's cool. It's about what's smart.

Treffpunkt, Digital Integration and Innovation Team Blog: <http://rtctreffpunkt.blogspot.com/>

