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Mock And Tease: Can Playful Provocation Make Customers Love The Brand?

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Problem of practice

Is teasing or mocking always negative? Maybe not. If a brand teases, mocks, or derides its audience, will consumers always take it negatively? Not if it is a part of a play, using dramatic exaggeration and closeness of people, says research by Demi Oba, Holly S Howe, and Gavan J Fitzsimons.[1] The research shows that leveraging teasing as a way of outreach humanises the brand in the customers' minds. It analyses teasing in terms of prosocial and antisocial dimensions. Prosocial joking pokes fun at social norms in minor ways. People tend to participate more when they feel close and feel like they can play. Antisocial teasing employs greater threats that may alienate the target audience. The insight offers a roadmap to chief marketing officers, communications specialists and brand managers on how teasing can enhance brand engagement. A key to using the roadmap is to carefully consider the social and psychological aspects of the teasing

[1] The article 'Brand Teasing: How Brands Build Strong Relationships by Making Fun of Their Consumers' by Demi Oba, Holly S Howe, and Gavan J Fitzsimons, featured in Volume 52, Issue 1 of *Journal of Consumer Research*, talks about how teasing communication increases consumer engagement with and connection to the brand compared to merely funny or neutral communication

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Teasing the consumer

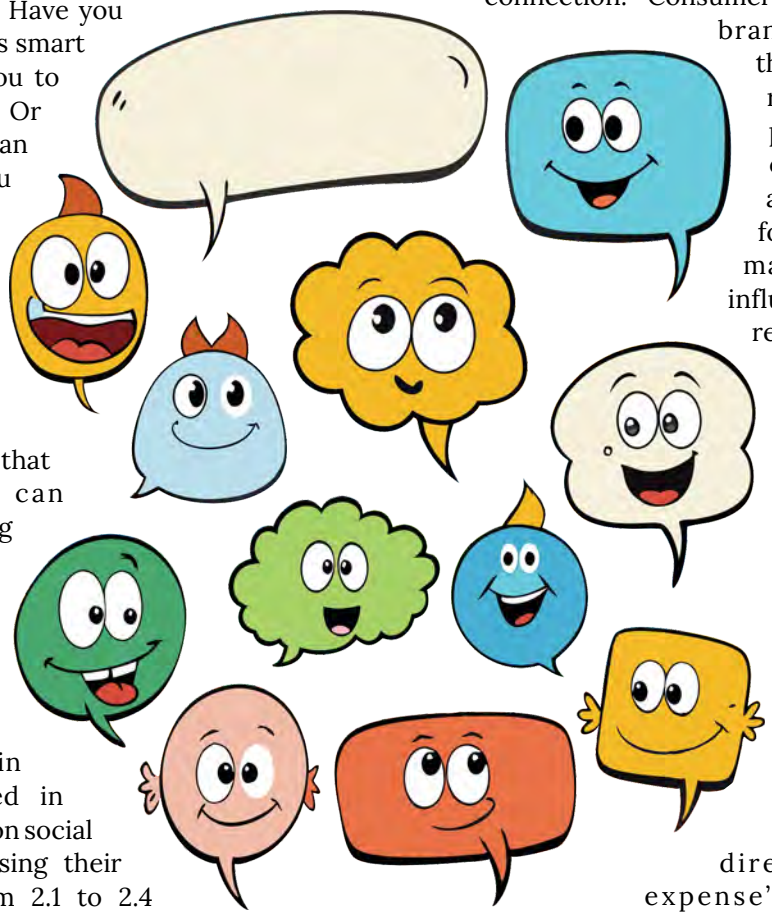
Maxwell Jacob Friedman (MJF): How old are you?

Fan: I am eleven (years).

MJF: Are you aware that your dad made a horrible mistake 11 years ago?

The interaction is from an autograph signing by professional wrestler Maxwell Jacob Friedman (MJF). Wrestling fans often flock to interact with him, despite knowing they may be roasted and trolled. They even hold up signs reading 'MJF is better than me and I know it' at live events. Teasing and mocking fans has earned MJF a cult-like following and a contract worth US$ 15 million with All Elite Wrestling, a professional wrestling corporation.

The above exchange illustrates how humour and teasing can draw in the target audience. Ask yourself as a consumer: Have you ever laughed at a brand's smart remark? Did it cause you to lean in with curiosity? Or maybe pull back with an eyebrow raised? Did you wonder: is this playful banter a stroke of marketing genius which can build deeper connections, or a misstep which can alienate its audience?



Research has shown that aggressive humour can damage bonds, making it an ineffective way to engage customers.[2] But the above interaction suggests otherwise. Even brands like the US-based fast food chain Wendy's have indulged in roasting their followers on social media platform X, causing their account to rocket from 2.1 to 2.4 million followers in just six months in 2017.[3] It also became one of the most-visited sites for roasts and memes.

Yet research says the opposite should happen because teasing highlights a target audience's flaws. Brand teasing risks offending consumers and producing negative attitudes.[4] So, how can this contradiction be leveraged?

The research by Oba and team offers the evidence-based answer to how consumers tend to humanise a brand that teases them and interpret the brand response as a person responding to them

The humour playbook

For a CMO, the struggle is how to use humour not just to generate attention but to convert that attention into lasting connections. Wendy's increased follower count proves provocative content travels, but the metrics that matter are not shares or impressions, but connections. How much does a consumer see the brand as part of who they are? The research by Oba and team offers evidence-based insight into when teasing builds that connection: Consumers tend to humanise a brand that teases them; they interpret the brand's response as if it were a person responding. We can visualise the insight as a three-part playbook for the CMOs and brand managers to positively influence consumer–brand relationships.

1. Teasing

While general humour is a benign violation, teasing is said to be intentional provocation directed at a specific target, coupled with playful markers: the provocation supplies the violation, and the playful markers keep it benign. Unlike simple puns or jokes, teases are directed 'at someone's expense' with markers like exaggeration or metaphor differentiating them from outright insults.

The nature of the tease determines its function: whether the tease is prosocial or antisocial. Prosocial teasing is playful and good-natured, whereas antisocial teasing is provocative or offensive. Prosocial teasing fosters connection, whereas antisocial teasing is viewed as genuinely aggressive.

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Prosocial teasing is heavily dependent on play and uses mild violations and friendly, exaggerated markers that signal closeness and make the target feel special. Antisocial teasers, with more provocation and serious violations, are interpreted as derisive.

Prosocial brand teasing can strengthen consumer-brand bonds: a clever retort is unconsciously perceived as a sign of a human mind behind the brand, thus ultimately strengthening the consumer-brand connection. Wendy's 'Roast Me' campaign on X is an excellent example of how a brand can actively engage customers through prosocial teasing.[5] The campaign encouraged customers to ask the brand to 'roast' them and gave them witty, playful replies. The constant interaction helped the brand gain organic reach, leading to increased brand awareness, increased sales, and positive brand perception.

In contrast, antisocial teasers employ harsher, more painful or humiliating tactics: disparaging stereotypes, aggressive competitor insults or attacks on consumer identity. Antisocial teasing uses 'relative provocation', propelled by psychological proximity and negative emotional language. Thus, an ad may be funny but consumers may interpret it negatively. The US-based ice cream retailer Häagen-Dazs came up with an 'International Passport' promotion in India, to announce the opening of a new shop.[6] However, this campaign backfired when a customer was 'denied' entry into a store. While the brand clarified that the promo meant to convey tasting international flavours in India without the need to travel, the wording of the promo led many to view it as 'smacking of apartheid'.

Sometimes a brand can successfully blend pro- and antisocial teasing to build strong brand engagement. The professional wrestling industry, with revenues of about US$1.6 billion, shows how to do it: the wrestler promos, with exaggerated expressions and scripted rivalries, are antagonistic and 'make fun of the crowd'.[7] The promos' basis is perceived closeness and playful provocation (prosocial teasing), giving fans enough relational 'credit' to read an insult as banter. The storyline 'turns a corporate spectacle into a character' that the audience can relate to. The campaign has been a success: WrestleMania 42 event garnered more than 1.3 billion views – up 18% from the previous event.[8]

2. Pranking

Gift-giving is traditionally a relationship-building activity. However, 'gag gifts' are intended to amuse at the recipient's expense – a form of disparagement or antisocial teasing. Some research suggests that aggressive humour, the basis for prank gifts, is detrimental to relationships. However, other research on teasing suggests that gag gifts can help strengthen relationships – if done in a prosocial way. So how can brands leverage prank gifts to build a closer connection? There are three ways a brand can use prank gifts.

First, they can make fun of themselves, which carries low risk, as KFC does, often launching limited-edition products like chicken-scented sunscreen and taking a dig at its own brand identity.[9] Second, they can opt for shared teasing, joking about something familiar, a good opportunity for building a strong connection, as Ikea did.[10] It launched a lollipop version of its iconic meatballs as an April Fool's joke but customer demand was so great that it had to bring the snack back as a limited-edition item. The third and riskiest option is to tease consumers, as Burger King did when it launched a one-cent Whopper promotion.[11] The catch? The customer had to check in near a McDonald's location to activate the offer. The reward? A Whopper at one cent. The use of pranking is evidence that the brand knows its customers well enough to tease them, helping it build a stronger connection and a distinct personality.



3. **Pointed provocation**

   Stand-up comedians often blur the line between playful ribbing and observations pointed at a certain group or individual. Stand-up comedians can make pointed, cutting provocations (antisocial teasing) that still feel like part of a shared comedic experience, even if that experience is fleeting, by creating a sense of intimacy (prosocial teasing). Self-deprecation, hyperbolic delivery, and theatricality are markers that signal the 'insults' are playful commentary rather than malice. Many brands have successfully teamed up with comedians to create standout messaging. Case in point: Ryanair, the Ireland-based low-cost airline, has adopted the stand-up comedy style to highlight its shortcomings, such as uncomfortable seating.[12] This self-deprecatory humour has endeared Ryanair to its audience.

Creating connections

Teasing audiences through playful or clever communication can infuse a boring brand with personality. Humour and light-hearted interaction can make a brand feel more approachable and relatable, which in turn strengthens loyalty over time. Brands like Indian insurance company Policybazaar, whose earlier ads depicted Bollywood star Akshay Kumar as Yama (the god of death), have shown how humour in an everyday, low-involvement product can humanise a brand and create a more personal connection.[13] In a similar vein, American insurance company Geico uses a talking gecko (pun intended!) to inject some humour in a staid category.[14]

Brands can also mock or tease competitors as American software company Slack did, when it ran a full-page 'Dear Microsoft' open letter in The New York Times, congratulating its rival for launching Teams while noting it was 'genuinely excited to have some competition'.[15] The communication, flattering on the surface but needling underneath, was directed at an industry insider. The over-the-top warmth was interpreted as confident wit rather than corporate aggressiveness and got coverage no ordinary news release could.

Who Can Tease And When

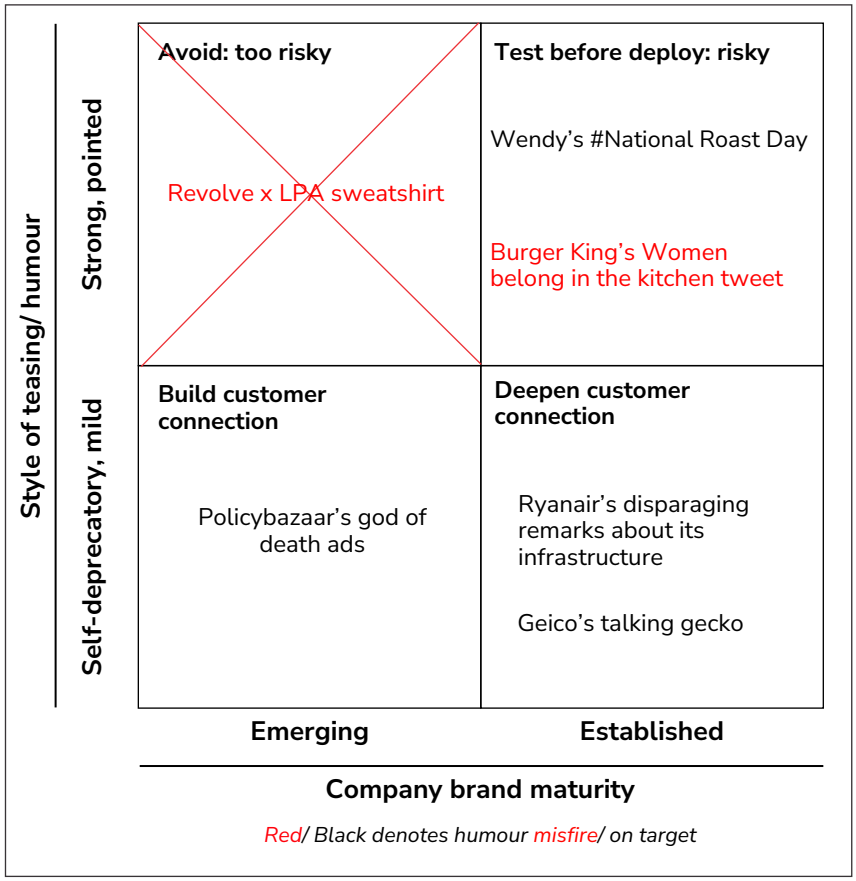
Not all brands have earned the right to tease. A brand that has no proper relationship with its consumers should not use teasing, as it runs a high risk of being interpreted as a downright insult. An untested brand should first build a baseline of brand equity through consistent, low-risk, and self-deprecating humour before turning the joke on its audience. Wendy's can tease. RyanAir can tease. MJF can tease. But they have already banked the closeness that allows provocation to read as affection and years of familiarity. When Revolve, a UK-based fashion e-tailer, featured a sweatshirt by label LPA that explicitly teased fat people, it met with immediate and fierce backlash.[16]

Teasing also depends on how quickly a brand can act. Wendy's #NationalRoastDay worked in part because the social team responded within minutes, keeping every roast relevant and signalling spontaneity and playfulness rather than a corporate statement. When each quip has to go through a multi-week legal review, the moment is gone, leaving provocation rather than banter. To mitigate, a brand needs to delink real-time community management from legal by setting clear boundaries upfront for approved topics and tone, along with an explicit list of off-limits issues.

Teasing is also not a one-size-fits-all approach: The brand has to consider its personality, its target audience, the target of the tease, and the context of delivery. Teasing can be a surprising but potent tool for brand building, with one caveat: brands should avoid teases that target immutable or sensitive aspects of identity or appearance — gender, weight, skin colour, or height — because these read as offensive, regardless of intent. Burger King UK's tweet 'Women belong in the kitchen' was meant to highlight the shortage of female chefs and to promote a cooking scholarship for women,

but it was still widely perceived as sexist.[17] Humour directed at observable behaviours and habits (see **Figure 1**), when delivered in a playful manner and with a shared understanding, is much less risky and has far greater potential to build connection, consistent with the principles of prosocial teasing outlined.

Figure 1: When to use teasing and of what type



Source: Created by the authors based on Demi Oba, Holly S Howe, and Gavan J Fitzsimons. "Brand Teasing: How Brands Build Strong Relationships by Making Fun of Their Consumers." Journal of Consumer Research 52, no. 1 (2025): 70–92. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucae051

Teaser ahead

Teasing is not just about making the target audience laugh; it can also be a strategy to build a strong relationship. Teasing makes a brand appear more relatable and engaging, but brand managers should take care to make the audience feel included, not targeted. Teasing should be a two-way street with the audience. When consumers are empowered to respond or clap back, they build a stronger connection with the brand. Brands should also take care to create a shared experience rather than judge or moralise. The best way to use teasing to build a strong consumer connection is to create shared experiences that make the audience laugh with the brand.



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