



Doughnut Branding Delights

By Abby Kleckler

The craving to satisfy a sweet tooth has led to many crazes throughout the last few years: cupcake bakeries, frozen yogurt stores, novelty doughnut shops. Although people's taste buds might draw them in, Voodoo Doughnuts in Portland, Oregon, and The Doughnut Vault in Chicago, Illinois, know it takes both a unique experience and a good product to keep people talking.

The owners of these two shops provide a half-dozen branding tips that have led to long lines for doughnuts and recognition as some of the best in the country.

1. Build the hype. What is something only your store offers? "The thing people talk about most is the circus we throw," says Kenneth "Cat Daddy" Pogson, co-owner of Voodoo Doughnuts. The store has done eating contests, gone for a world record with 666 pounds of doughnuts in one box and performs weddings on a regular basis.

The more fun the better for Pogson and his business partner Tres Shannon. The duo recently bought a record label and plans to release a new 45-rpm record each month for 13 months. The genre of each single may vary, but the lyrics center around one thing: doughnuts. The number 13 also mirrors the Voodoo Dozen customers can purchase at the shop: five regular doughnuts and five crazy doughnuts for \$13.

2. Let your employees be your brand. Austin Baker, director and partner at The Doughnut Vault, works with a small team responsible for everything from execution of the doughnut technique to guest interaction. The

company only stays open until the doughnuts sell out, so they use social media to tell people when they are running low.

"Whoever is working the counter or our little food truck will do the tweets, and they get to put their own voice to it," Baker says. "Some of them are funny in different ways, and we get a lot of feedback and Yelp reviews about how nice everyone is; that's super important."

3. Find the financial sweet spot. No company wants to raise prices, but it is often necessary for maintaining a fair price that leads to both customer satisfaction and profit. The Doughnut Vault charges \$2 for a large old fashioned and \$1 for a coffee, a \$3 deal Baker says is well received.

Voodoo Doughnuts has vowed to keep some doughnuts under a dollar, but the innovative, larger doughnuts are more expensive. The company never raises all its prices at once. Instead, it chooses a few doughnuts at a time to up the cost.

"I was always freaked out about raising prices before, and people really don't blink," Pogson says. "We're not trying to gouge anybody."

4. Engage with the community. Voodoo Doughnuts sponsors wrestling teams, does prison outreach and chooses micro-niche charities to help. "It's true all our community stuff is advertising, but it's something we can believe in and a way we can give back," Pogson says. Voodoo Doughnuts is a large tourist stop, but it's these sponsorships and volunteering that keep them connected with the local Portland community.

5. Create a consistent image. Voodoo Doughnuts started packaging its sweets in pink boxes and thought little of it. The team, however, quickly realized this was an inexpensive way to make the brand noticeable. They put large logos on the boxes, what Pogson calls "walking billboards," and carried over the pink theme to many of its stores.

The Doughnut Vault has more of a classic feel in its store, so it made sense to put some money into a 1957 International Metro for its Vault Van. The vehicle maintains the same blue, green and red color scheme as the store and appropriately sells the old fashioned around town.

6. High quality is key. Both doughnut shops say once getting people in the door, it's the product that makes for return customers. The Doughnut Vault takes pride in handcrafting each of its doughnuts. They splurge on all-natural fabbri paste out of Italy for the icings and glazes, minimize additives and start with fresh shortening every morning.

A daily special added to their everyday lineup of doughnuts keeps people's mouths watering and allows the team to have a little fun with experimenting. And fun is definitely key for The Doughnut Vault and Voodoo Doughnuts.

"It's easy and exciting, in my opinion, to draw people in and get people's attention," Pogson says. "Then flip it over and nail it at the very end with a good product." **LGR**

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In Chicago, The Doughnut Vault sells out of its classic varieties like the jelly-filled (above) and its daily specials by 1 or 2 p.m. every day. In Portland, crowds line up at the 24/7 operation to get a taste of its doughnuts like the namesake Voodoo doughnut (right). Both shops pair personality with delicious product.