

The 'IHOb' rebrand: A brilliant viral marketing campaign

You probably heard about it. You might have even talked about it. If IHOP had simply announced it was debuting a new line of hamburgers, would you even have noticed?

The brilliance of the "IHOb" "rebrand" isn't just that it got the internet buzzing about IHOP. Not all publicity is good publicity—people have been making fun of IHOP's branding and typography choices, and that's why it looked at first like the brand had fallen on its face.

But people don't go to restaurants to celebrate the quality of the branding. They go for the food. And the IHOb episode got people sharing two positive messages about IHOP's food:

- IHOP's specialty is pancakes, we value IHOP as a place to get pancakes, and we shouldn't forget that IHOP is a place for pancakes.
- That said, IHOP has a new line of hamburgers it's pretty proud of.

IHOP is not actually wasting millions and millions of dollars on new signage for a brand that really would be pretty stupid if it were made permanent. This move was just a clever online campaign that got people to comment on they liked about IHOP to begin with, and to pay attention to a new product line that might have otherwise escaped your notice.

It was clever. It worked.

A Lesson in Viral Marketing from IHOP

We all wish we could go viral on social media, and small business owners are no exception. How great would it be to get worldwide exposure from one simple post? You can't control whether a campaign goes viral—the social media community makes that decision. But you can strive to capture attention and make an impact in unique and unexpected ways. This is also known as guerrilla marketing.

For marketing purposes, what can we learn from what IHOP did that will benefit your own small business?

The IHOB Story

On June 4th, the breakfast food chain IHOP released a teaser video of an upcoming name change from IHOP to IHOB that left followers puzzled. What could the "B" possibly stand for? In an attempt to revise their public image from a breakfast and late-night option to a mid-day and dinner choice, the



International House of Pancakes shifted to International House of Burgers.

The chain tweeted, "For 60 pancakin' years, we've been IHOP. Now, we're flippin' our name to IHOb. Find out what it could b on 6.11.18."

Many speculated it stood for breakfast, brunch, or even bacon. This viral burger debate has lent itself to a whole host of jokes, videos, and memes. Nearly 39,000 people took IHOP's playful Twitter survey, which asked whether the "b" stood for biscuits, bacon, butternut squash or barnacles. (Bacon was the winner.) Others on social media debated whether the "b" might represent breakfast, brunch or bananas. But nobody anticipated it would actually stand for burgers.

IHOP has actually had burgers on the menu since the brand launched in 1958.

"The big opportunity for the IHOb brand is to develop our lunch and dinner business," IHOP Chief Marketing Officer Brad Haley told USA Today. "Burgers are the most consumed entree item for men, women and children in America. It made sense to start with burgers."

The IHOB Impact

IHOB revealed the secret on June 11, stating that this was just a temporary change, with the switch to IHOb meant to inject drama in its launch of the Ultimate Steakburgers lineup. The seven burgers include the Big Brunch, a burger with hickory-smoked bacon and a fried egg, and the Cowboy BBQ, with crispy onion rings and barbecue sauce.

Regardless, the internet has been going crazy and chains from all over have been piggybacking on the popular story, further amplifying its virality. Fast food and restaurant social media accounts have been picking up on the social buzz and trolling IHOB—and the results are hilarious.

Burger King adjusted their Twitter handle to read Pancake King. "Sorry, old Burger King can't come to the phone right now..."

White Castle announced a playful name change. "We are excited to announce that we will be switching our name to Pancake Castle."

Wendy's, well known for their witty tweets and other social media replies, was also quick to jump on the bandwagon. "Remember when you were like 7 and thought changing your name to Thunder BearSword would be super cool? Like that, but our cheeseburgers are still better." and "Not really afraid of the burgers from a place that decided pancakes were too hard."

IHOb replied: "We don't want any beef with you, we just want to share our beef with the world."

IHOP's (IHOB's?) potentially greatest rival, Denny's, even decided to get in on the fun. "Grandpa, do you remember the Great Burger Wars? Lol no. I was chillin drinkin milkshakes and trying to make sense of Westworld."

While these responses may seem harsh, the international breakfast chain got exactly what it was hoping for—a successful publicity stunt. While IHOP is fighting to change their eatery image, their marketing campaign incorporated some key aspects that produced a viral success.

It was one of the most brilliant ad campaigns we'd heard about in a long time. Here are a few reasons why it was extremely successful:

IHOP has a lot of brand equity. It built on that by doing a great job of teasing the campaign and not revealing the punch too soon. When was the last time an ad campaign got this many people talking?

The campaign was a home run because it accomplished what it set out to do: raise awareness of the fact that IHOP serves burgers.

Another benefit: Many younger consumers don't even know what IHOP stands for, so it opens up a new generation to its core business.

And who knows? The odds are many diners will now actually order a burger from the pancake chain because they heard about all the hype surrounding the sandwiches.

How To Go Viral

While there is no way to guarantee a campaign will go viral, there are steps you can take to increase your chances of getting self-perpetuating buzz for your business.

Build Anticipation

The first step to producing a successful marketing campaign is building anticipation. In order to excite and entice your audience, you must first create suspense surrounding your product or service release. IHOP did an excellent job of this through a brief social media video that left customers curious.

Looking at IHOB's overall impact, while social media feeds are back to talking about what people think about Donald Trump meeting with Kim Jong Un, for one glorious day, it was all about what people thought about IHOB – a genius marketing campaign, indeed.

What will you think of for your business?