

Kraft Mac & Cheese: The World's Largest Blind Taste Test



You know you love it.



SUMMARY

How do you announce the biggest change in a beloved brand's 80-year history?

By not saying a word.

As the world shifts toward better-for-you foods, Kraft was looking for a way to launch their new recipe featuring no artificial flavors, preservatives or dyes. But change is scary. Especially when it comes to an iconic American brand. So we worked with Kraft to develop a communications strategy that made the product change virtually indiscernible on-pack, while going dark in all media for three months. During that time, consumers purchased over 50 million boxes of the new recipe and virtually no one noticed a difference in taste. Only then did we announce what we had done: successfully pulled off the World's Largest Blind Taste Test.

This case study shows the power of a counterintuitive strategy to:

1. Uncover the elephant in the room
2. Inspire a breakthrough creative idea
3. Deliver outsized business results for a brand swimming against the tide

THE PROBLEM

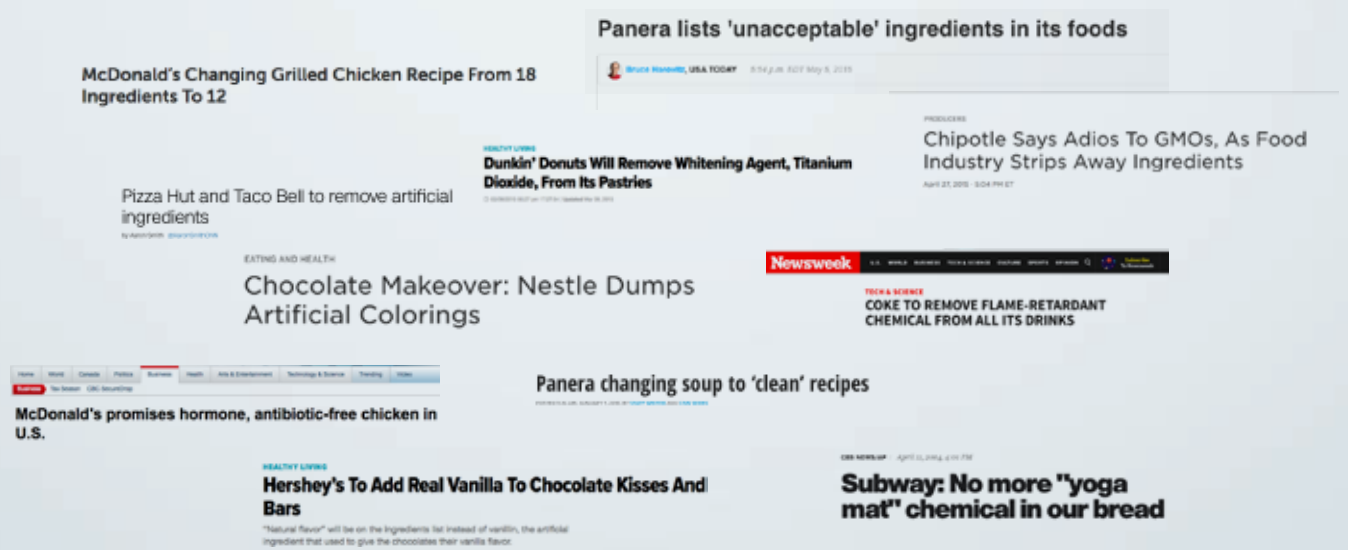
Kraft Macaroni & Cheese faced the same challenges as other center-of-the-store brands: Consumers were leaving the category, opting for fresher, less processed foods.

While Kraft is the clear leader in the boxed mac and cheese category, they needed to evolve to maintain and grow their dominant position.

So in 2015 they developed a new recipe for the iconic Blue Box Kraft Mac & Cheese that was free of artificial flavors, preservatives and dyes.

They wanted to get the word out about the new recipe but were uncertain about how to advertise it.

A big concern was that Kraft's story of cleaning up their ingredient line would get lost in the clutter of similar recent announcements: Cage-free eggs. No artificial ingredients. Gluten-free. No hormones. No artificial preservatives. Dye-free.



We shared their concerns. But we also believed we could develop a strategy that would communicate the news in a uniquely Kraft Mac & Cheese way and give people more reason to love the brand.

WHAT WE DID & WHAT WE LEARNED

Kraft Mac & Cheese has been around for 80 years. It's the mac and cheese most people grew up with. It's got a signature look and familiar taste. And it's loved by people from all walks of life, young and old alike.

We needed to understand what it meant for Kraft Mac & Cheese to make a change of this magnitude. Social media chatter supplied some initial clues, but we undertook primary qualitative research with our core audience to uncover how people really felt.

Kraft Mac & Cheese Loyalists and Switchers represent the heart and soul of the brand. Loyalists are parents who grew up on Kraft Mac & Cheese and now make it for their own families. For them, Kraft Mac & Cheese IS mac and cheese. It's what they expect mac and cheese to taste like. When it comes to feeding their families, they're making changes: switching from white bread to wheat, incorporating more veggies and drinking less soda. And while they don't expect Kraft Mac & Cheese to be health food, they know it could be better for them.

Switchers are parents who have started buying brands perceived to be more natural. They like the variety, it's frequently on sale and the kids like it. They have a soft spot for Kraft Mac & Cheese, but they're buying it less than they used to. We shopped with Loyalists and Switchers at their local supermarkets. We spent time in their homes and pantries and around their kitchen tables. We talked in-depth one-on-one and with small circles of friends.

Our research uncovered an interesting paradox. Both groups liked that Kraft was "taking steps in the right direction." Getting rid of artificial ingredients, changing the recipe for the better. Being in step with the times.



But underneath the positive response, there was an undercurrent of something else: Fear. The very same people who applauded the change also expressed doubts: “What will it taste like?” “Will my kids still want to eat it?” “Has it happened already? I think it did and that’s why it tasted different to me last night!”

They liked the change. But it scared them.

These contradictory feelings were a revelation. They were the elephant in the room. They showed that as much as culture is shifting – trying to eat right, seeking out better-for-you food options – there is resistance. Change is good. Change signifies progress. But change also rips the rug out from under us.

Behavioral Economics has a term for this: *loss aversion*.

Loss aversion meant that people who should have been excited to learn that Kraft had eliminated artificial ingredients were focused more on what they might be giving up. They said they were in favor of improving the recipe, but their visceral reactions told a different story:

Don’t mess with my Kraft Mac & Cheese.

Britney, Switcher | Denver

I would be bummed if it tastes different.

Jason, Loyalist | Minneapolis

If it doesn’t taste good, then I won’t eat it.

Kristen, Switcher | Denver

My kids have heard the rumor that Kraft is taking the coloring out of their mac and cheese. They’re very nervous. My daughter’s like, what’s it gonna look like? What’s it gonna taste like?



THE STRATEGY

Removing the artificial ingredients from Kraft Mac & Cheese was the biggest news in the brand's 80-year history. On a rational level, our audience recognized it as a step in the right direction. But on a gut level, it was freaking them out.

How could we reassure America that the new Kraft Mac & Cheese with no artificial flavors, preservatives or dyes still tastes like the same Kraft Mac & Cheese we all know and love?

The answer lay in turning the usual advertising claims on their head. We had news. But we weren't going to shout from the rooftops. Instead, we would take a counterintuitive approach and *undersell* the changes.

THE BRIEF

Kraft Mac & Cheese is new and not improved.

Our brief was focused on getting the word out about the changes without scaring people off. It was designed to inspire our creative team to find a new way to deliver a better-for-you message in a cluttered marketplace.

"It wasn't like every other brand saying 'we made it healthier'. This brief called for a brand action." – Executive Creative Director

THE IDEA

A different kind of strategy called for a different kind of creative idea. We couldn't just tell people Kraft Mac & Cheese's taste hadn't changed. To truly get people to believe our changes to the recipe hadn't changed the taste they loved, we had to prove it to them . . . without them knowing it. To do this, we created the World's Largest Blind Taste Test.

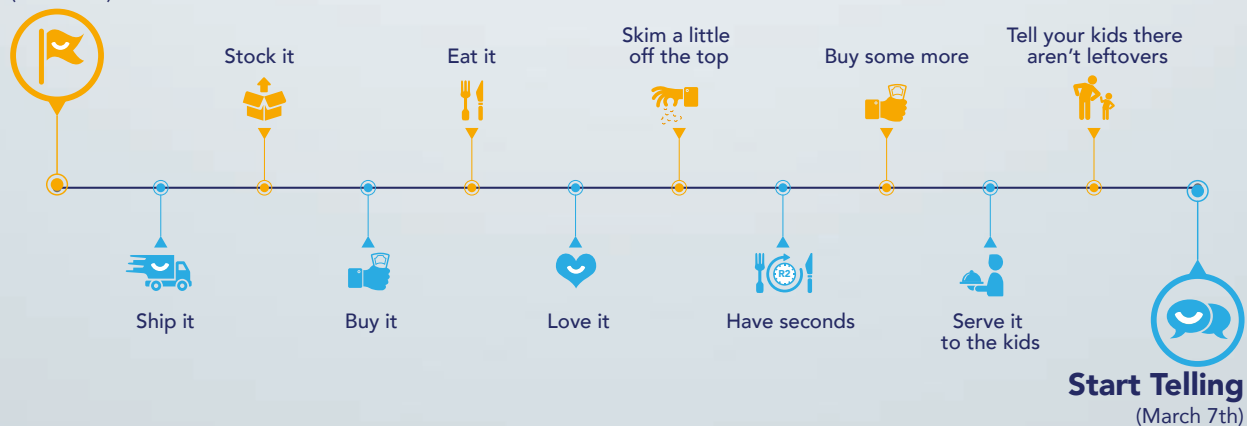
In September 2015, Kraft began printing millions of new boxes for their new product, updating only the ingredient label on the side panel. In November 2015, they began shipping these boxes to stores nationwide. In December 2015, stores began selling the new recipe, unbeknownst to their employees or consumers. There was no advertising support, no mention of the change in recipe, no media, no PR. No anything.

Then we watched for three months as America consumed 50 million boxes of the new recipe without noticing a thing.

On March 7, 2016, we announced we had successfully pulled off the World's Largest Blind Taste Test and the results were just what Kraft had hoped – virtually no one had noticed a change in taste.

When we announced what we had done, we needed to explain it a bit to truly create an impact. TV spots introduced millions to the basic story, while the website and online video went deeper. Magazine ads, banners, social posts, radio, in-store, a Snapchat integration and vast media coverage helped drive home the message: we removed artificial ingredients from one of the world's most beloved products and proved that it still tasted like Kraft Mac & Cheese.

Start Selling (Dec 2015)



RESULTS

During the three-month taste test period, without any paid media support announcing the product change, we sold over 50 million boxes of Kraft Mac & Cheese. This figure was consistent with the same quarter of the previous year, and less than 40 people reported a change in taste via social and consumer hotline channels.

When paid media and PR kicked in we saw a dramatic response. People started talking about and eating more Kraft Mac & Cheese. The word was out that Kraft had quietly removed the artificial ingredients from its iconic Blue Box and people were keen to try it for themselves to see if it still tasted like Kraft Mac & Cheese.

The campaign was featured in hundreds of media outlets, from E! to the New York Times, and coverage was overwhelmingly supportive: 92% of mentions and conversations had a positive tone (Source: Kraft Heinz Company). Stephen Colbert even devoted his entire Late Show monologue to the campaign.

Three weeks after announcing we pulled off the World's Largest Blind Taste Test, the campaign generated over one billion earned media impressions. It also drove a 291% increase in visits to kraftmacandcheese.com compared to the previous month.

Those figures helped us eliminate any concern about a change in taste, and with this affirmation we saw an impressive uptick in sales, reversing previous declines.

By using a counterintuitive strategy to announce its recipe change, Kraft Mac & Cheese powerfully demonstrated its ability to evolve with the times, get people talking and grow the business.