

Excerpts from entry in *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MAJOR MARKETING CAMPAIGNS* on the 'Frito Bandito' Campaign

Overview

Corn chips called "fritos" were originally a Mexican snack food, found only in the southwestern part of the United States. A Texan named Elmer Doolin changed all that, however, when he bought the recipe for the chips and a small distribution area from a Mexican man in San Antonio for \$100. By the 1940s, Fritos were being advertised in national magazines. But while the product's first ad campaign—"Munch a bunch of Fritos"—brought the corn chips national attention, the later "Frito Bandito" campaign became its most memorable.

Created by the firm Foote, Cone & Belding, the "Frito Bandito" was a cartoon Mexican bandit who would resort to schemes and subterfuge to take away a person's Fritos corn chips. If that did not work, he would simply rob them. Frito-Lay said that the animated character was meant to be cute and funny, but many did not see him that way. In addition to complaints about the character's violent nature, Mexican-American groups complained about the stereotypical depiction. Some broadcast stations pulled the commercials in response to protests. Despite threats of boycotts and legal action, Frito-Lay stuck with the "Frito Bandito" campaign until 1970, and Fritos became a highly successful national product during its run.

Historical Context

According to *Advertising Age*, fritos were born in Texas. *Texas Monthly* described them as corn chips that were "one and a half inches long, half an inch wide, and seventy thousandths of an inch thick," made from corn meal masa, which was also used to make tortillas. Even before Fritos became a commercial brand, cooks in the Southwest would roll out corn meal dough, slice it into ribbons, season the pieces, and fry them. Mexicans living in Texas called the resulting snack "fries," or "fritos."

After Doolin bought the recipe and a seven-store distribution area in 1932, he set to work producing Fritos in his mother's kitchen and sold the product from the back of his Model T. According to company lore, Doolin experimented with the product until he felt that he had achieved the right combination of different types of corn, correct chip formation, and the best frying system.

In 1933, Doolin moved the company to Dallas, a better distribution center than San Antonio. It was not long before Doolin was able to hire a staff to make regular store deliveries. He also handled potato chips under licensing agreements. By the 1940s, Doolin could afford to buy color advertisements in magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, and he was selling Fritos brand franchises. By the 1950s, the national advertising he had begun after World War II was stepped up when he launched the "Munch a Bunch of Fritos" campaign.

By the time Doolin died in 1959, Fritos was a major component of the snack food industry. Two years later, the Frito Company merged with H.W. Lay and Company, the potato chip manufacturer owned by Herman W. Lay, to form Frito-Lay, Inc. Lay, a former Fritos franchise holder, had cultivated a highly trained sales staff that was among the first to stock merchandise for store owners and use point-of-purchase displays. The company's extensive use of its route sales force—the "store-door" delivery system—was an effective tool for promoting its product and increasing revenues. Colin Warwick, a longtime Lay consultant, worked with the company in developing its sales training program, which he described as "probably the first of its kind in the snack food industry." After the merger, Lay put the store-door delivery system to use in promoting Fritos. The delivery system was "88 percent of the secret of Frito-Lay's magic . . .," according to business consultant and author Thomas J. Peters. By 1965, when Frito-Lay merged with Pepsi-Cola Company to form PepsiCo, Inc., the snack food company had become a major player in the industry.

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Marketing Strategy

The "Frito Bandito" campaign featured an animated Mexican bandit wearing bandoliers, a sombrero, a long mustache, and a pair of six-guns. He spoke with a heavy Mexican accent, and his modus operandi in the commercials was generally to take people's Fritos from them through various schemes or, failing that, simply to rob them. One spot aimed at children took a different approach, however, with the Bandito teaching kids to sing along to the words of a song that started with "Ay, ay, ay, ay, I am the Frito Bandito."

One notable television spot featuring the Bandito on the Moon aired in mid-May 1969, a few months before the first lunar landing. The 30-second spot showed the Bandito greeting the astronauts after they had landed in a typically heavy accent: "I ham the moon parking lot attendant. Now if you will kindly deposit one bag of crunchy Fritos corn cheeps for the first hour . . ." Frito-Lay and Foote, Cone & Belding went to great lengths in creating a Moon-like set with bushels of vermiculite, constructing a realistic likeness of the lunar landing module, and borrowing space suits from the company that made them for NASA.

Outcome

Even though Frito-Lay considered the campaign to be successful, it provoked strong criticism during its run. Among other things, some disliked the campaign's use of violence. The most highly publicized objections came from Latino groups, which criticized the commercials for their reliance on an ethnic stereotype. An organization called Mexican Americans in Gainful Endeavor told the company, "This organization is opposed to your 'Frito Bandito' television commercials, as we feel that they perpetuate the stereotyped Mexican image, which is false and is an injustice to the person of Mexican descent." In December 1969, the Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee announced plans to file a complaint with the Federal Communications

Commission, claiming entitlement to free airtime from television stations to refute what it perceived as negative advertising directed against Mexican-Americans. Boycotts of Fritos corn chips were threatened.

Frito-Lay stuck with the campaign for two more years, despite the controversy. The company contended throughout its run that the Bandito was meant to be "a cute lovable character" and noted that its own sales staff, which included many Mexican-Americans, like the Bandito. Frito-Lay said it had undertaken a survey of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles and San Jose indicating that 85 percent of the interviewees did not have a problem with the cartoon character. The company apparently took some of the criticism to heart, however, because it cleaned up the Bandito's appearance and at some point took his guns away.

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Although the "Frito Bandito" ads may have been a public relations failure, Fritos was a highly successful national product during the campaign's run. As noted in the April 30, 1979, issue of *Advertising Age*, "The real action in the snack food market has been in the Mexican food line—corn chips and, specifically, tortilla chips. They have shown phenomenal growth, while the potato chip market has remained flat."

The company ended the "Frito Bandito" campaign in 1970 and, in the early 1970s, began responding to consumer trends for healthier snacks and diversified product lines.

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Further Reading

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"Time to Answer Frito Bandito?" *Broadcasting*, December 15, 1969, p. 40.

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