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## Sampling: The New Mass Medium

**Tactic Has Won Over Likes of Starbucks, McD's and Morphs Into Big 'Event'**

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Sampling: It's the new medium.

One of marketing's oldest and least glamorous practices -- doling out free product -- has come a long way from the gray-haired ladies in the supermarket aisle. No longer the province of marketers who can't afford to buy mass media, deep-pocketed giants from McDonald's to Starbucks, Coca-Cola and Dunkin' Donuts are adopting sampling on a grand scale, turning it into a media event -- and, in some cases, the media buy.



Free as a bird: McDonald's is planning to give away chicken biscuits.

One reason posited is the economy, the theory being that pinched consumers appreciate freebies and that pinched marketers are looking for less-expensive ways to get their messages out. According to Scott Thurston, president of Street Sampling, a giveaway of 50,000 samples would require 250 man hours translating to between \$15,000 and \$20,000 for labor. The company can then add on publicity stunts, promotional vehicles and the like. Compare that with \$335,000 to produce a 30-second spot, according to a 2006 study conducted by the American Association of Advertising Agencies, and somewhere between \$100,000 to \$250,000 to run that spot during most prime-time network TV shows.

That's not to mention that without the aid of paid broadcast spots, Starbucks can generate hundreds of millions of free

media impressions nearly every time it makes an offer or retrains its employees.



Why marketers are going for massive product giveaways

Even traditional supermarket sampling is on the rise. Don Stuart, managing director of Cannondale Associates, said it's expected to double in the next three years.

### Media budgets

Sampling as medium is getting a boost from tools such as engagement and media planning. David Sommer, managing partner of MEC Retail, a division of Mediaedge:cia which handles in-store shopper marketing, said sampling funds traditionally came from a marketer's promotion budget, but now, "oftentimes I think the media-buying agency recommends it does come out of a different budget. It comes out of the media budget and not the promotions budget."

Boosters point to a simple reason for the sampling boom: It works. "With a sampling effort, we have a greater impact," Mr. Thurston said. "We're able to communicate with that consumer one-to-one. Nothing sells like trying a product."

"How many messages are people hit with every day?" asked Seth Goldman, founder of Honest Tea, which is 40%-owned by Coca-Cola. "It's the quality of impressions [that are important], if you were to look at conversions to consumers," said Mr. Goldman, whose brand is rolling out [an extensive sampling program](#) this summer. "I would trade 100 media impressions for one person-to-person, cup-to-mouth sampling impression."

It's accountable, too, Mr. Thurston said. "We can look at sales numbers in ZIP codes of the areas that we've sampled and look for spikes in sales at the retail level after the sampling program. We may also create a microsite, and we can look at the traffic that was driven to the site because the URL was distributed through the sampling effort."

McDonald's clearly is a believer. The fast-food chain is holding its largest sampling event this week to introduce its Southern-Style chicken biscuit and Southern-Style chicken sandwich. It plans to give out about 8 million sandwiches with purchase of a specified drink.

### Investment

Marta Fearon, director-U.S. marketing at McDonald's, declined to discuss the event's cost but said it was an investment in the business. The sampling is being bolstered with national TV spots by DDB, Chicago, and a dedicated chicken-or-the-egg website from Golin Harris and digital shop Game Agency.

Ms. Fearon said the chain started to notice the tangible benefits of sampling when it gave away free chicken strips to launch the item five years ago. The result was sales that were double digits above expectations. The chain has also held a number of sampling events this year, including a two-day giveaway of its McSkillet burrito in February. McDonald's handed out 3 million sandwiches during the event, and U.S. same-store sales soared 8% following a slower-than-usual January. In the two subsequent months, same-store sales have fallen short of some rivals'.

Several industry watchers point to the economic climate as the reason for increasing sampling events. "It's actually fairly fundamental the reason why it's happening," said Tom Pirko, president of Bevmark. "When there's less disposable income ... you become more cautious. Since the great majority of purchases are on impulse, in times like

this, you just don't have the kind of enthusiasm to just grab something. You're much more value conscious."

Dunkin' Donuts is holding a free iced-coffee day on Wednesday and has offered samples of new products this spring, including its hash browns. Dunkin Brand Marketing Officer Frances Allen said that while sampling is a great way to let consumers try the products, it's also nice to give them a treat when they're feeling stretched.

Larry Light, past chief marketing officer of McDonald's and founder of consulting firm Arcature, said sampling doesn't have anything to do with the economy. Marketers can discount to give consumers a break or add permanent value items, but discounting hurts brand equity, he said, while sampling builds it up. Arcature's sampling research has found that while 80% of respondents would prefer a free sample to a coupon, one-third of them would be willing to come back and pay for something they had tasted and liked.

And then, of course, there's simply the appeal of getting something for nothing. In addition to distributing coupons in newspapers offering a free cup of Starbucks' new blend every Wednesday through May, the coffee giant launched a microsite and sampling program aimed at getting consumers to try its different coffee varieties. More than 13,000 requests for samples came in the first week.

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## Free for all

Sampling is becoming the new medium as megamarketers give away mega amounts of product. Some recent examples:

- May 15      **McDonald's** will give away 2 million Southern Style chicken biscuits and 6 million Southern Style chicken sandwiches.
- May 15      **Dunkin' Donuts** will hold its second-annual Iced Coffee Day and expects to give away 4 million cups of coffee.
- April 15     **Dunkin' Donuts** holds Tax Day promotion and gives away a doughnut with the purchase of a cup of coffee.
- April 7      **Starbucks** holds a tasting of its new blend, Pike Place Roast.
- Feb. 28-29   **McDonald's** gives away 3 million McSkillet burritos to celebrate Leap Day.
- Feb. 26      **Dunkin' Donuts** offers 99¢ lattes while Starbucks is closed for barista training.

-- Emily Bryson York

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