

Simple Joke to Marketing Genius

The story was huge. A Pizza store owner promised to give away FREE pizza for an entire day, the day after pigs grew wings and took flight. Actually, the FREE pizza deal was to be triggered by a slightly less probable event, the Colorado Rockies would have to sweep a 3 game series with the mighty New York Yankees in June of this year. Of course, the Rockies did sweep the Yankees; and thousands of free pizzas were given away, but that's just the start of the story.

On November 28, 2007, John Keiley, owner of Johnnys New York Pizza, was the featured guest speaker at the Denver Entrepreneur Meetup (<http://entrepreneur.meetup.com/72/?gj=sj3>) as we talked about the use of Unconventional Marketing methods in small business. Keiley's story may be the most amazing Unconventional Marketing story of 2007.

John has approximately 25 feet of window space facing the busy Wadsworth Boulevard, just north of Mississippi, in Lakewood. Rather than follow suit with his competition by posting sales and weekly specials, he hires window painting company to put up humorous pictures and messages. That's where the amazing tale starts.

After the blizzards of 2006, with the parking lot full of snow, the window sign at Johnnys offered 3 FREE snowballs with the purchase of any pizza. At the start of the 2007 baseball season, the signs on the windows promised FREE pizza if any MLB team went 162 – 0. After each Major League team had lost at least one game, John came up with another idea: FREE pizza if the Rockies swept a 3 game series with the Yankees. Everyone knew it was just a clever, attention-getting sign; a way to poke fun at his Yankees fan customers and attract the attention of passing motorists.

The Rockies were playing some pretty good baseball during the early part of June. As the Yankees series started, the Rockies had won 10 of the 15 games they'd played that month. If they kept winning at the same rate, they would win 2 of the 3 games they played against the Yankees. The window gag seemed to be a pretty safe way to attract some attention; nobody would have bet that the Rockies would sweep the Yankees.

As the Yankee series drew near, the media attention was intense. On TV, the Yankee visit was big news; that gave John an idea. He asked one of his computer savvy employees to take a digital picture of the window sign on the store and email it to the various Denver TV sports departments. John thought that maybe someone would see his FREE pizza offer and mention it. He figured, maybe someone would put the picture on TV for a few seconds. The efforts paid off as one of the stations aired the picture and mentioned the promotion.

On Monday of that week, one television station asked for an interview. They stopped by the store, took video of the sign and the inside of the store. Then the media floodgates opened. Tuesday brought another TV crew. And the Rockies won the first game.

As the Rockies won game 2 of the series, the media attention grew for the FREE pizza offer at Johnnys New York Pizza. In addition to TV, radio stations were talking about the offer. There were interview requests; there was buzz all over town for the pizza store at the corner of Wadsworth and Mississippi in Lakewood. It seemed as though John Keiley had pulled off the perfect promotion. He was getting tons of free publicity for his store. Television and radio stations were announcing that the city was just one game away from free pizza. Johnny's was now part of the Rockies fervor.

Then, the unthinkable happened: the Rockies swept the Yankees..

Suddenly it was time to make good on what started as a joke. John could have explained that the offer was just a gag and tried to back out of the deal. He could have chosen to only open for 3 or 4 hours on the day of the pizza giveaway. He could have limited the number of pizzas based on the hourly output of his store's single pizza oven. Of course, exercising any of those options would have resulted in bad PR. In a live television interview in the Coors Field parking lot after the game, John announced that the free pizza offer was real; people could come by between 11 and 8 the following day for a free pie

John Keiley stepped up to the plate to make the most of this incredible opportunity. Drawing on his extensive experience in the food and beverage business, he knew the crowd could be large. Managing the crowd was just one small piece; he needed to increase production to meet the possible overwhelming response.

John enlisted the help of a friend with a mobile pizza oven; he brought in his entire staff to prepare, cook and serve; he hired a DJ to keep the crowd entertained, set up tables and chairs in the parking lot, and decorated with purple and white balloons.

In the surface, it would seem that Keiley was going to take a big hit on the FREE pizza offer. On Friday, June 22nd, Johnnys New York Pizza, working with the precision of a NASCAR pit crew, gave away more than 2400 free pizzas during a 9 hour period. The store spent thousands of dollars on food and labor that day, plus there was the cost that came with the loss of paying customers during the 9 hour giveaway period.

Rather than to focus on the money he was spending, Keiley focused on the fact that he was getting far more media coverage than he could have afforded to purchase. The mobile pizza oven he brought in helped to increase production well beyond the store's normal limits. People stood in line for 30 or 45 minutes because they became caught up in the event. They came for more than just a free pizza; they wanted to be a part of something big. It was a party with music, TV cameras and a sense of community.

John told us that since the FREE pizza giveaway his business is up dramatically. He's more than made his money back, and sales are still up. The unlikely promotion has helped Johnny's New York Pizza to reach new customers. Many who received FREE pizza have come back as paying customers. John said that he's met people who have driven for miles to thank him for holding the FREE pizza event.

Another benefit: his 15 minutes of fame has taken him from an anonymous small business owner to mini-celebrity. When approaching other business owners, he has the added notoriety and credibility of “the guy who gave away all that free pizza.”

John Keiley’s story was an inspiration to all who attended the Denver Entrepreneur Meetup. Hearing how he took advantage of a big event that was already getting media coverage, and riding its coattails as a way to stretch a small advertising effort into the media event of the year caused us all to look for unique opportunities to promote our own small businesses.

The Denver Entrepreneur Meetup meets once a month to provide a professional, secure, and open atmosphere to discuss business opportunities, provide each other with honest advice, leads, further education, and moral support. Past speakers have included Susan Remkus of Copywriting, Etc., John Nelson of Achievement Dynamics, and Paul Miller of Piper Electric. Membership is free. For more information, log on to:
<http://entrepreneur.meetup.com/72>

Johnnys New York Pizza is located at 1000 S Wadsworth Blvd., Lakewood, CO 80226 303-935-8818, and a new location at 10081 W 26th Ave, Wheat Ridge 303-597-0222. See them online at: <http://johnnysnyp.com/>

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