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MARKETING

How Raising Cane's is making marketing magic with chicken fingers

In a crowded world of fast-casual chicken, this brand, and its celebrity CEO, have built a unique strategy around a simple, never-changing menu.

By Lisa Jennings on Dec. 12, 2024

Raising Cane's CEO Kevin Garcia (left) and Chief Marketing & Innovation Officer Todd Graves, left, at a meeting of a prospective member in Mexico earlier this year. | Photo courtesy of Raising Cane's.

Standing in a dusty Southern California festival site hours before a celebrity-packed Halloween event was scheduled to begin, Raising Cane's founder Todd Graves was in his element.

He was there to show off his pumpkin (named Rudy). It was the largest pumpkin in the world, weighing in at 2,471 pounds (or the equivalent of 20,000 chicken fingers), and he had spent years trying to find one big enough to make that claim. Once he found the right "pumpkin guy" who hooked him up, Graves then hired the best pumpkin carvers to make it extraordinary.

This was no simple Jack o' Lantern.

The elaborate artwork included a Frankenstein holding a Raising Cane's cup, alongside a witch, a bat cave and skulls with the brand's "One Love" theme—and, of course, a bust of Grave's dog Cane, for whom the restaurant chain is named. A ghostly fog spewed from the top. The Jabba the Hutt-like sculpture was housed in a tent with VIP positioning next to the event food trucks, where thousands of attendees would soon gather and gawk.

Watch it here

But, before the throngs were admitted, Graves visited with social media influencers who arrived like visiting royalty, each getting a personal tour of Rudy the Pumpkin, to allow for the collection of selfies and video posts—with Graves, of course.

Because Graves, almost by sheer force of will, has become quite the celebrity himself.

The entrepreneur from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who famously launched a restaurant brand that pretty much only sells chicken fingers, has become the latest restaurant industry celebrity CEO, in the fine tradition of Dave Thomas, Tilman Fertitta, John Schnatter and Jack (of Jack in the Box).

Graves is actually co-CEO of Raising Cane's, leading the company with the lower-profile AJ Kumaran (also COO), who handles more of the day-to-day operational matters.

Todd Graves, left, with co-CEO AJ Kumaran at a gathering of core members in Mexico earlier this year. | Photo courtesy of Raising Cane's.

Marketing is Graves' thing. And, if it seems like Graves has been everywhere lately, that's because he is.

Graves has been a visiting shark on the latest season of "Shark Tank," for example. He recently made his **debut on the Forbes 400**, a ranking of the country's richest people (he's reportedly worth about $9.5 billion). The chain **was one of Ad Age's Marketers of the Year** for 2024. And he **routinely makes headlines around the world**.

He has created a unique strategy that taps his own somewhat quirky passions—like monster pumpkins, dinosaur bones (**he owns a triceratops skull that's on display in a museum**) and philanthropic moves like **helping to restore marine ecosystems**.

But Graves has become a master at mixing the brand's marketing with a steady supply of celebrities from the sports, music and social media worlds, from Post Malone and Snoop Dogg, to Travis Kelce and Katie Ledecky.

It's a move that has significantly raised brand awareness at a time when the more-than 850-unit Raising Cane's has its sights set on reaching 1,000 restaurants and becoming a Top 20 restaurant chain with more than $10 billion in sales.

Cane's is almost halfway there, expecting to reach $75 units by the end of the year and projecting to pass $5 billion in sales.

Marketers who have watched Raising Cane's for years say there is much to learn from the brand's strategy, though it's a recipe that would be difficult to replicate.

And that's in part because Raising Cane's pretty much does only one thing: chicken fingers, sauce, crinkle-cut fries, slaw and Texas toast.

There is no new menu news to promote because that menu doesn't, and won't, change. So TikTokers are forced to come up with new ways to eat the never-changing menu, posting hack videos that involve a drink-cup-sized amount of Cane's sauce, or ordering toasts "BOB" (butter on both sides) to make a build-your-own chicken sandwich.

Here's a TikTok hack video

But marketers do point to some basic elements of Raising Cane's strategy that others can learn from—and that have set the brand up for its growth push ahead.

The origin story.

Graves will be the first to note how far Raising Cane's marketing has come from the days when he would print out leaflets at Kinko's and slip them onto car windshields in Baton Rouge.

He loves to tell the story of how he came up with the idea for a restaurant that only served chicken fingers for a business class in college. It got the lowest grade, and he was told it would never work. When he went to banks for loans, he was turned away.

So, he spent a few years working—on an oil rig off the California coast and fishing for sockeye in Alaska—until he raised enough money to open the first unit in 1996 near Louisiana State University. Instead of naming the brand "Sockeye's," as initially planned, he took a friend's advice and named it after his Labrador retriever, Raising Cane.

That origin story is literally on the wall of each restaurant in some form, and tribute is paid to Cane the dog (Graves is now raising Cane III, a celebrity in his own right) in the décor in often-creative ways.

Dan Bejmuk, CEO and co-founder of the digital agency Dreamboo, said the origin story resonates with consumers who see Graves as a person they would want to be.

"The Cane's origin story is probably as important, if not more important, than the product they're selling. Without that origin story, it's just another chicken brand," said Bejmuk. "It's him coming out there and saying, 'I have the grit, the tenacity. I'm the entrepreneur that was told he couldn't do it, but I did it.' It's something that's aspirational."

It's also a branding element that will live on, even without Graves, he noted.

"Imagine a world where Todd wasn't associated with the brand anymore," said Bejmuk. "That Cane's origin story would still be relevant."

The Celebrity CEO.

But Graves is still very much involved with the brand, as a 90% shareholder, another rarity in the restaurant world for a chain this size. That level of ownership also comes with risk.

He often preaches about not taking on too much debt, **sharing his own costly mistakes after Hurricane Katrina temporarily closed two dozen units** in the early years.

Once he got growth back on track, Graves spent years cultivating Raising Cane's brand awareness. He has hosted or been featured in shows ranging from "Animal Planet" to "Secret Millionaire." After the pandemic, he created a docu-series on Discovery+ that looked at how independent restaurants were recovering ("Restaurant Recovery").

Becoming a Celebrity CEO has its risk, notes Bejmuk, pointing to similar self-made millionaires like John Schnatter of Papa John's, **whose racist comments led to his ouster from the helm of the pizza chain.**

"As human beings, all it takes is one bad day to potentially dismantle a lifetime of a reputation," said Bejmuk.

But it demonstrates the importance of "having a story about a brand that certainly may come from a founder, but might not be all about the founder," he said. "That helps to dramatically remove that risk."

Graves, meanwhile, said he's simply looking for opportunities to create impressions that are entertaining, and "not just showing off our food."

He concedes that his celebrity comes, in part, because he is a rare bird as a founder still running and controlling his nearly $5 billion business. Appearances on shows like "Shark Tank" help "humanize" that role, he said.

"Too many people in the business that grow it to a certain point, and they're doing really well, and they sell to private equity and lose control of the business," he said at the Halloween pumpkin event.

"I just wish founders would hang on longer and keep control longer, to continue to grow it," he added. "You'd have more people like me who want to be out here with the pumpkin.

"People are like, 'This guy. Something as crazy as a pumpkin? I like this guy. I like Cane's,'" he said. "It creates more loyalty."

Famous friends.

Graves, meanwhile, is happy to share the limelight. And he does, often.

Many large restaurant chains tap celebrities to help promote their brands, but Raising Cane's does it with proficiency that is unmatched.

Within hours of the Dodgers winning the World Series, **Kike Hernandez was working the drive-thru window** at a unit in Los Angeles. Singer Mitchell Tenpenny made fries at a unit in Nashville after being nominated for a CMA Award for best new artist.

Earlier this month, Graves was with rapper Swae Lee "pre-gaming" at a Raising Cane's before the Miami Art Week; and **showing support for DJ Khalid's foundation on a golf course.**

To kick off NASCAR season, the chain promoted its speed of service with an ad campaign featuring trailblazing female driver Toni Breidinger. For back-to-school season, the chain joined with Chance the Rapper to visit a school and support the singer's SocialWorks philanthropic effort.

Graves and Snoop Dogg. | Photo courtesy of Raising Cane's.

Snoop Dogg and Ledecky came to the chain's all-expenses-paid gathering of about 3,000 Raising Cane's crew members in Cancun, Mexico, (temporarily renamed "Cane-cun") in September.

And Graves is famously a pal of rapper Post Malone, who helped design two Raising Cane's restaurants that have become destinations, **one in Utah near Malone's home**, and another in Texas that pays tribute to **Malone's love of the Dallas Cowboys**.

Graves said he is often approached by celebrities for brand partnerships, but his first question is always: Are they a Cane's?

"If it's not someone who lives and breathes Cane's, then it won't work because it's not genuine," said Graves.

Malone, for example, grew up with Raising Cane's and loved the brand. He invited Graves to be in one of his music videos. The two didn't do a deal until they had known each other for four or five years, Graves said.

"He was like, 'I want to be the Cane's guy,'" said Graves. "You make friends and then friends help each other."

The local ground game.

The celebrity content filling social media feeds has been a key component in building brand awareness for Raising Cane's expansion.

But another important distinction is Raising Cane's ground game, or what marketing consultant Barry Westrum calls "street fighting."

"They have a ground movement that's phenomenal in how they generate excitement in the community," said Westrum, a former CMO of KFC and Taco John's International, who recently launched Minneapolis-based Westrum Strategic Partners.

When a Cane's unit opens for the first time in a market, fans who have been well steeped in mishmap on social media line up out the door on Day 1, which, in itself creates buzz.

It isn't until several units open in a market that the chain starts investing in more traditional (and expensive) media, like TV or billboards.

In addition, Cane's restaurants are designed to capture specific local elements, alongside the yellow lab Cane and the origin story, said Westrum.

"You'll see stories of the community, and high school football helmets in the restaurants," he said. "That attracts the high school crowd. And, when you think about building affinity, it's with that high school crowd.

"It used to be teens would gather at a pizza place, but now it's Raising Cane's."

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Westrum added.

Indeed, it's a brand Gen Z loves. Raising Cane's, for example, was among the "Gen Z's Top 25 Most Magnetic Brands" by research and strategy firm dedx, scoring behind McDonald's and Wingstop, but better than Chipotle.

Cane's local-market emphasis, however, has had its challenges.

In 2021, the company acquired the iconic Googie-style restaurant in Los Angeles that for 67 years has operated as Norms diner. Raising Cane's had planned to convert the location to what would have been another destination restaurant for the brand—promising to preserve and protect the Atomic Age design that has become part of the city's iconography.

The proposed design for converting the Googie Norms location to Raising Cane's. | Image courtesy of Raising Cane's.

"I thought, what a perfect way to say to LA, 'We are your people,'" Bejmuk said, when he first learned of the move.

But locals who were afraid of change pushed back. Within weeks, Raising Cane's dropped the proposal for conversion, which wouldn't have happened for another two years anyway.

Raising Cane's still owns the building, so it's not clear what will happen when Norms' lease runs out in 2026.

Next year, Raising Cane's is planning to open another 100 restaurants. And Graves said he will continue to look for ways to connect with fans.

When asked if he would ever consider taking Raising Cane's public, he said, "Oh God, no."

To do that, he said, "I would have a fiduciary responsibility to all these shareholders that bought it at this, and want it to go to that."

As a private company, he said, "If we have a bad year or something's not going right, I don't have to raise prices. I don't have to look at compromising quality. Or if I have to cut back growth because we're growing too quick, I can say, let's cool it down.

"I can do the right things for people, because it's me," he said.

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Lisa Jennings is a veteran restaurant industry reporter and editor who covers the fast-casual sector, independent restaurants and emerging chain concepts.

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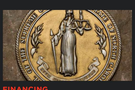

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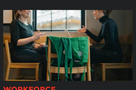

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