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Food for thought: Should you mention competitors in your ads and PR?

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Should you mention competitors by name in your ads or news releases? In 25 years in the PR/marketing, no client has asked me to mention their competitor. It's OK to say "Our service is the best in the industry" or "In a survey our product beat the competitor's 4-1." Always be able to back up your claim.

But should you say "My brand Acme is better than their brand Apex?" Coca-Cola and Pepsi have been banging heads in competitive ads since the first Pepsi Challenge in 1975. Is either one winning?

In the Spring, Taco Bell targeted McDonald's morning meal crowd, launching its "national breakfast menu," waffle taco and breakfast burritos. Taco Bell's big cheese said his goal is to double their revenues from \$7 billion today to \$14 billion by 2021. It's a long way to catch McDonald's \$27 billion annual sales including 25% of U.S. morning fast food.

To shake things up and build buzz, Taco Bell's ad agency found 25 men named Ronald McDonald who agreed (for pay, we assume) to say they love Taco Bell's morning menu. Another commercial promotes the waffle taco with a song to the tune of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm."

McDonald's counterattacked, posting on Facebook a picture of its Ronald McDonald clown petting a chihuahua with the caption, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." One analyst said McDonald's was dismissing Taco Bell as a "cute, harmless little competitor." But McDonald's took the David-Goliath threat seriously, launching a free coffee promo. McDonald's blamed lower quarterly sales on the lousy winter.

In 2012, half of network commercials compared their product to someone else's. But only 5% named their competitors. Mentioning your rival by name catches attention, creates buzz, but it's not necessary. Everyone remembers the woman asking, "Where's the beef?" in Wendy's commercials.

Naming your competition gives free advertising to them. In 2001, Pizza Hut sued Papa John's for advertising their "better ingredients." The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case, and Papa John's still uses that slogan. Some customers will confuse who was claiming what. Everyone loses - or wins.

Some experts say social media leads to conversation and product comparisons. One analyst said, "The amount of tweets that Taco Bell received as a result of this ad campaign is tremendous. But if I were McDonald's, I'd be retweeting every tweet from a customer who's tried Taco Bell's breakfast and wasn't happy." Another way to start your day off right (less fattening, more profitable): Creative PR / Marketing by a proven pro - me.

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