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## Pizza Hut thinks outside the pizza box, boosts online sales

Eating pizza while watching sports is a time-honored tradition, and the competition for marketing opportunities that combine pizza and sports is heating up more than ever.

While Papa John's Pizza is currently the official pizza partner of the National Football League, Major League Baseball and the National Hot Rod Association, Pizza Hut has created its own unique branding opportunities in the NFL and in college sports.

Pizza Hut has deployed a variety of innovative initiatives to both engage with pizza-loving sports fans and to rebrand itself as more of a pizza delivery service than a restaurant chain.

From its highly successful partnership with Yahoo during the 2017 Super Bowl and March Madness, to being named the Official Pizza of the NCAA, Pizza Hut is focused on making a new name for itself with sports fans.

In January, Pizza Hut, a subsidiary of Yum! Brands Inc., teamed up with digital content platform Yahoo to launch the online game Squares Pick'em that football fans could play while watching the Super Bowl.

Collaborating on Squares Pick'em for the 2017 Super Bowl was a strategic move that allowed both partners to capitalize on game day online traffic. The 2017 championship game was one of the most visited days all year for Yahoo Sports, while Pizza Hut saw a record-breaking number of online orders that day, according to Marketing Daily, a media tracking and information service.

Fans that signed up to play Squares Pick'em in a browser or the Yahoo app selected Pizza Hut-themed squares on a 10x10-square grid prior to kickoff, with

### SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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each square representing a possible score at the end of each quarter of the game.

Players that picked the square with the matching scores won, although no official prizes were offered. Fans taking a "commissioner" role in Squares Pick'em could set up their own private leagues, create settings for their league and invite friends to join.

Next, Pizza Hut sponsored Yahoo Sports' Tourney Pick'em, a bracket challenge for the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament in March. In Tourney Pick'em, players picked the winners in each tournament game matchup, earning points for each correct pick. Players could fill out up to 10 brackets and create groups in order to compete with others to see who racked up the most points.

The partnership with Yahoo paid off for Pizza Hut in a big way. Although Pizza Hut has not disclosed the number of online transactions, its participation in the Super Bowl and March Madness Pick'em games, driven by Pizza Hut's advertising campaign and Yahoo's promotional efforts on its blogs and else-

where, netted the restaurant its three biggest-ever online order days, Market Daily reports.

With college sports fans arguably among the biggest consumers of take-out and delivery pizza in the country, Pizza Hut didn't limit its marketing efforts to basketball. As the Official Pizza of the NCAA, Pizza Hut carved out its own unique niche across college sports.

In November, it chose its first Pizza Hut All-American, a paid opportunity for a college sports fan to attend as many NCAA championships as possible during the 2016-17 season and document the experience online and on social media.

Pizza Hut selected Jason Zone Fisher of Cleveland from more than 1,000 applicants in 42 states. According to Pizza Hut, it picked Fisher for his love of pizza and college sports, his understanding of social media and his experience hosting a show on the Big Ten Network.

Fisher was tasked with showing how Pizza Hut celebrates college sports and its fans around the country by revealing facts and traditions about each

championship, meeting Pizza Hut fans, and distributing prizes — and documenting it all on a blog, Twitter and Instagram.

Fisher kicked off his tour at the end of November at the NCAA Cross-Country Championship in Terre Haute, Ind., which was briefly known as "Terre Hut" in honor of Pizza Hut. Of course, hundreds of Pizza Hut pizzas were delivered to fans at the event.

In another innovative move just in time for March Madness, Pizza Hut went out on a limb and introduced "Pizza Hut Pie Tops," custom-designed basketball shoes that can order pizza for delivery at the press of a button on the shoe's tongue.

The footwear was a new way for customers to order pizza online, adding to existing methods, including the Pizza Hut app, Facebook and Twitter messenger, Amazon Echo, Echo Dot, Amazon Tap and Fire TV.

How do Pie Tops work? Designed by custom sneaker luminary Dominic Chambrone, also known as the Shoe Surgeon, the shoes are equipped with Bluetooth communication via a smart button inside the tongue, which, according to Pizza Hut, connects the shoes to the Pie Tops app on the user's smart phone, allowing the user to submit a pizza order at the press of the button.

Only a limited supply of Pie Tops was available. Adweek, an advertising newspaper and media source, noted that Pizza Hut commissioned only 64 pairs of Pie Tops, one set for each of the 64 teams in the March Madness field and most were given to influencers and media people. Of course, Pizza Hut's goal wasn't to sell sneakers, it was to show how easy it is to order from Pizza Hut on multiple digital devices, Adweek said.

On the other hand, the small supply of sought-after Pie Tops presented new opportunities to get fans' attention. Pizza Hut gave fans who followed Fisher on Twitter and Instagram the chance to win a pair of Pie Tops during the Final Four. Fisher also led fans on a virtual "360 panoramic hunt" to spot a pair of the Pie Tops hidden in the Uni-

versity of Phoenix Stadium, the site of the Final Four games.

Finally, Pizza Hut also covered its bases on television by drafting retired NBA star Grant Hill to star in commercials showing how easy Pizza Hut makes ordering pizza. At the same time, Pizza Hut offered a special deal during March and April on a large two-topping pie for carry-

out or delivery — as long as it was ordered online.

The 2017 Super Bowl and March Madness Pick'em games gave Pizza Hut the chance to aim its online delivery message at a huge number of pizza-loving sports fans.

Following those efforts up with the Pizza Hut All-American's tour, Pie Tops giveaway,

television commercials and special online promotions extended the marketing momentum among college sports fans over several months, leaving fans not only with a new impression of Pizza Hut and its ordering options, but most likely wondering and eagerly anticipating what Pizza Hut will do next year.