

The New York Times

Bold Commercials and Flavors Aim to Spice Up Chili's Brand

September 29, 2011 | By Andrew Adam Newman



IN a new ad for Chili's, the 36-year-old restaurant chain, an office worker in his 20s approaches the cubicle of a co-worker, and asks, "Hey Jill, you want to go to Chili's tonight?"

She swivels in her chair, smiles, and when she speaks what comes out is the voice of the bluesman John Lee Hooker, singing, "I love that talk, when you talk like that, you knocks me out, right off of my feet."

Looking surprised but undaunted, he says, "So, that's a yes, or — ?"

As she nods, it is again the voice of the late Mr. Hooker from "Boom Boom" — first released in 1962 — that she incongruously lip-syncs, "Hoo, hoo, hoo."

The ad — by Hill Holliday, Boston, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies — continues with a voice-over that urges, "Go bold with Chili's \$20 dollar dinner for two," and footage of entrees eligible for the deal, including a new menu item, grilled shrimp tacos.

"We want to play up the boldness of the brand," said Krista Gibson, senior vice president for brand strategy at Brinker International, Chili's parent company, about the new spot, which is scheduled for an Oct. 3 premiere. "How he behaves is bold, how she behaves is bold, and the food we're featuring in the spot is boldly flavored."

Along with the advertising campaign, Chili's newest plans for spicing up its brand include new menu items, a new logo, and a redesign for restaurants that was recently completed in 61 of the 1,299 Chili's outlets in the United States. An additional 240 operate abroad. Chili's, which declined to reveal the cost of the campaign, spent \$125.3 million on advertising in 2010, less than Olive Garden, \$162 million; Applebee's, \$147.9 million; and Red Lobster, \$129.8 million, according to Kantar Media, a unit of WPP.

Beyond the challenge of the economic downturn, Chili's has struggled to draw consumers being beckoned by other chains. "Where Chili's and Applebee's may have been new and hot in the '90s, now they have become more traditional," said Darren Tristano, an executive vice president of Technomic, a restaurant consulting and market research business.

Popular so-called fast casual chains like Panera Bread and Chipotle Mexican Grill tend to have more healthful menus and better ambience than typical fast-food chains — and lower prices than most sit-down restaurants. Technomic recently calculated that a meal of chips and salsa, chicken tacos and a soft drink costs \$9.86 at Chipotle and \$16.72 (including a 15 percent tip) at Chili's, a difference of 70 percent.

Grocery chains like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, meanwhile, increasingly offer "meal solutions," an industry term for dinners that require little or no preparation, and those compete with casual restaurants, too, Mr. Tristano said.

Brinker owns 824 Chili's restaurants in the United States, with an additional 475 licensed to franchisees. Among the company-owned stores, at least, the financial picture has been brightening.

Year over year revenue at individual company-owned restaurants dropped an average of 5.6 percent in fiscal year 2009 and 4.6 percent in fiscal year 2010 for Chili's, whose fiscal years close at the end of June. But for the recent quarter than ended in June, average sales were up 2.1 percent over the same quarter in 2010, and the year closed with average per-restaurant sales down just 2 percent from last year.

Surely the best known campaign for Chili's was introduced in 1996. A jingle began, "I want my baby back, baby back, baby back," — a standard lovelorn setup — followed by a pause, and then "ribs."

The jingle, by Tom Faulkner Productions, topped the list of "10 songs most likely to get stuck in your head," by Advertising Age, besting such ear worms as "We Will Rock You," "Y.M.C.A." and "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

The campaign was by GSD&M, Austin, Tex., part of Omnicom, an agency Chili's released after two decades before hiring Hill Holliday in 2007.

David Gardiner, a creative director at Hill Holliday, said that about three years ago, as the economy began to decline, Chili's "reverted to doing 100 percent product driven work," focusing particularly on specially priced dishes and including live-action shots of diners or servers only incidentally if at all.

"They have a trade term for it: food romance," said Mr. Gardiner, who described the genre as "extreme close-ups of food, slow-motion food being prepared, with a piece of music and an energizing voice-over."

Some new ads differ from those produced in recent years in that they are set outside restaurants and include "engaging storytelling," Mr. Gardiner said, adding that appetizing shots of food still remain an element.

In another new spot, three office workers step out of their building and shield their faces with their hands. "What is that?" says one. "It burns!" says another. And another adds, "It's singeing me!"

A window washer nearby deadpans, "It's the sun." Then a voice-over says, "Get out of the office more often, with Chili's \$6 Lunch Break combos" and shots of half sandwiches with soup and French fries are shown.

The new Chili's spots "strike a nice balance between branding and personality and the food," said Jeffrey T. Davis, president of Sandelman & Associates, a restaurant consulting and market research business. "They pump up Chili's personality, but also romance the food and end on strong value.