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Controversy Is Just What BK's 'Whopper Virgins' Is After

Crispin Shrugs Off Critics of Ads Featuring Folks Unaware of the Burger

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Published: December 08, 2008

CHICAGO (AdAge.com) -- Bothered by Burger King's [upcoming "Whopper Virgins" campaign](#)? Great, all the more talk value for the chain -- and if you don't like it, you're probably not the core demographic anyway.

Burger King this week is unveiling [a hot set of ads](#) laser-pointed at the hard-core burger-loving demographic it calls "Super Fans." The ads have been teased on the web and generated controversy in the blogosphere.



'Whopper Virgins' in Romania take part in the taste test.

Seeking to build on the success of last year's "Whopper Freakout," the marketer tasked Crispin Porter & Bogusky with creating a "pure taste test" composed of "Whopper Virgins" who had never tasted one of the flagship sandwiches.

To accomplish that, Crispin trekked to Baan Khun Chang Kiean, Thailand; Kulusuk, Greenland; and Budesti, Romania. The work, from director Stacy Peralta and production company NonFiction, highlights

reactions to the products.

The premise behind the push sparked a backlash among nutritionists, anthropologists and parents, with critics claiming Burger King is exploiting poverty-stricken regions for marketing. "I don't think indigenous people should be used in that way to amuse a bored public that wants a sensation at any price," a commenter wrote on New York City blog Gothamist.

By design

The reaction was expected, even welcomed by the agency. "Advertising is designed to be talked about, and hopefully people notice it," said Rob Reilly, co-executive creative director and partner at Crispin. "I'm not surprised that people are writing about ['Whopper Virgins'], positive or negative, because that's the design of how we approach things as an agency."

He added: "We go into every project thinking: Is it an idea that the press -- and not necessarily the advertising press -- will write about? If it's not, then maybe it's not such a good idea."

Brian Gies, VP-marketing impact at Burger King, emphasized that the company had undertaken a variety of initiatives to avoid cultural insensitivity, including using anthropologists and working with local governments. He said the company isn't planning to apologize, much less take the campaign down, "because we haven't done anything wrong."

Even so, some franchisees are nervous. "With a very strong campaign like this one that's a little more edgy, there's a little more angst among franchisees in terms of how it will be received -- not among Super Fans but other consumers," said Chris Ondrula, chief operating officer of an Illinois-based Burger King franchise business. "I think it would be naive not to be concerned about an ad campaign like this," he said. "If this most recent election cycle proves anything, it's that any innocuous comment, like 'lipstick on a pig,' can be taken out of context and have a life of its own on the internet."

'Antagonizing'

Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys, said even people who don't eat burgers have word-of-mouth power, and some of them are gatekeepers for their children. "What do you get by antagonizing a customer base?" he asked. "Who would want to do that these days? If I'm not specifically buying your stuff, it may be that I'm still in a position to hurt you just as badly."

But as Burger King predicted, so far the Super Fans have been loyal to the push. When Sharon Akabas, associate director-Institute of Human Nutrition, Columbia University, was quoted in a New York Daily News article saying that Burger King might as well have shipped a crate of guns to the Third World, a string of hate mail followed. One accused her of trying to deprive "man of his God-given right to juicy hamburgers." Some of them, she said, didn't bear repeating.

But while there are polarizing views on either side, one party remains unfazed: McDonald's, whose signature Big Macs serve as foil for the Whopper, declined to comment.