

BY DESIGN » IMAGE UPDATE

# Getting your eyes off the fries: Mickey D's gets a makeover

Chic new TV ads and upscaled outlets are part of a McDonald's campaign to court the cool kids, **Amy Verner** reports

For the first 19 seconds, the commercial's stylish set-up suggests any number of possible products. There's the au courant orange lipstick, strappy fashion booties, the girls' coiffed, cocked heads as they stare at an art gallery installation, all set to Amanda Blank's edgy electro track *Make It Take It*.

But then the mystery is revealed, thanks to a shot of an attractive, smiling female McDonald's employee, followed by a box of Chicken McNuggets, dipping sauce, fries, the orange lipstick girl licking her fingers – presumably as she polishes off the last crispy morsel – and finally, *ba da ba ba ba*.

The spot, which was ubiquitous during the 2010 Olympic Games, joins three other recent McDonald's commercials as a mouth-watering exercise in cool.

Lovin' it? You bet.

The campaign has dovetailed with a move to upscale the fast-food chain's interior design. In Toronto, a sign reading "Whoa – New Look" signals the transformation of an outpost in the city's north end. Once an eyesore in shiny plastic, it now boasts soft lighting, sleek faux bois finishes and even a gas fireplace. Yellow steel girders against the multipanelled exterior seem inspired by European architecture.

A group of Canadian owner operators had the opportunity last fall to visit European restaurants, which have a more design-savvy aesthetic. "You bring that knowledge back and tweak it," says McDonald's Canada president and chief executive officer John Betts. At least half of the brand's 1,400-plus Canadian locations have been renovated thus far, with completion expected by 2012. This is not a cookie-cutter rollout, though; urban outposts will boast slicker design – think stylized diner – than suburban counterparts.

Forget Parmigiana Chicken Snack Wraps and McCafés –



Re-imagined McDonald's outlets, like this one in LaSalle, Que., have taken a cue from European locations.

McDonald's is out to let Canadians know that it's going much further than updating its menu.

People are noticing – and scratching their heads. A comment on YouTube says it all: "McDonald's isn't supposed to have nice ads!"

If it seems at all oxymoronic that a burger behemoth wants to win over tastemakers, Matthew Litzinger, vice-president and creative director for Cossette, the agency responsible for the ads, says, "I don't think it's us telling people how cool we are but us reflecting the cool people that come here."

Betts acknowledges that the chain had an image problem. "We had lost our way, we were outdated, not connecting to customers," he says by phone from Vancouver (the company was the official restaurant of

the 2010 Olympics).

"We were still doing well because McDonald's has brand equity, but we weren't hitting the mark, we weren't contemporary. ... There's no doubt that McDonald's is a lot cooler a place now than five or six years ago."

In the new commercials, directed by Henry Lu, the Big Mac patties look as juicy as ever, but the burger almost seems an afterthought to the zeitgeist signifiers – the [facebook.com/bigmacfanatic](http://facebook.com/bigmacfanatic) scribbled in a notebook, the late-night texting and the music of hot French duo Bot'Ox. There are no voice-over narrators, no prices and no value-meal incentives.

"They wanted to take eyes off the fries and put them on [the girls'] thighs," muses Tony Kerr, associate professor in

the faculty of design and the advertising program chair at the Ontario College of Art & Design. The message is "stylish, happy, terrific," he says.

"It's 'You deserve a break today' in a modern version," he adds, referring to one of the chain's retired slogans.

It's also a departure from the use in TV spots of megastar pitchmen such as Michael Jordan and Justin Timberlake (one ad, which made its debut last summer, features Canadian figure skater Patrick Chan).

Litzinger says people's attitudes are different today. "I think the vibe is different; it's more realistic. ... Anyone who's really hip doesn't tell people they are, and I think the client now recognizes that."

Which helps explain the mu-

ic; it's embedded into their lifestyle and individuality," he says. "[McDonald's] is using music as the tool to spread these videos virally."

Or, at the very least, it helps to ensure that the commercial doesn't play as white noise. "If you were watching TV, you would probably look over to see what that is," says Andrea Praet, trend director at Style-sight, a forecasting agency based in New York.

But is music enough to reconnect with former customers or attract new ones? People whose personal values do not include Value Meals are not likely to be persuaded by a cool song; they'll just go download it from iTunes.

For Kerr, this is beside the point. "I don't think it matters that it's not going to get you in," he says, noting that during any given class, there's always one student eating McDonald's. "It's better to be talked about than not talked about at all."

Buckman agrees, adding that staying relevant among young people is the most important goal, especially at a time when people are becoming increasingly health-conscious and questioning corporate practices.

Betts says improved meal options such as salads and gourmet coffee have been an integral part of the brand's re-imagining. "It doesn't take much to reconnect with customer if you provide something they're willing to take a chance on," he says.

Of course, some would argue that if McDonald's is latching onto a trend, the trend has peaked. Feeding off the same hipster cues typical of Gap ads, the McNuggets spot registers as "a little too *Sex and the City*" for Praet.

"But," she adds, "I think McDonald's has always tapped into pop culture at the right time."

If so, it may not be long before employees start asking, "Do you want music with that?"