

## The \$80 Million Raisin—Why Viral Doesn't Always Mean Successful 2010-02-12

If you were born in the U.S. before, say, 1982, you surely remember the wrinkliest, purpliest spokescharacters ever unleashed on the American public: the Claymated California Raisins.

The transformation of the Raisins characters into cultural icons has often been presented (even as a business-school case study) as a testament to the success of the ad campaign. But very few know how the tale actually ended, and therein lies a valuable lesson for the contemporary marketing landscape.



*Funky Fast-Food Raisins*

The brainchild of an ad agency retained in 1987 by the California Raisin Advisory Board to plump up their members' sales, the California Raisins were initially featured in several 30-second television spots, moonwalking and soulfully belting the virtues of California's raisins as a healthful snack and recipe ingredient to the tune of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine."



The spots were a hit by any standard. The American public just couldn't get enough of those zany singing raisins.

Seemingly overnight, what began as a couple of television spots spun off into t-shirts, and collectible plates, and a music CD (or was it an LP?), then fast-food kids' meal toys, and action figures, and then a Saturday-morning cartoon series...and even, very nearly, a video game.



*Really, Ray?*

Within the year, the Raisins were the darlings of mid-80s American pop culture—right up there with parachute pants and Madonna's lacy bra. The California



Raisin Advisory Board had succeeded, a good ten years before anyone had heard the term, in crafting what we know today as a viral hit—of a pop-culture-shaking magnitude. Of course, without YouTube, it took \$80 million a year over two years to create and maintain it.

So what did they really get for their (inflation-adjusted) eighty million dollars? Well, in the first year of the campaign, 1987, the Advisory Board logged a 10% jump in U.S. raisin sales. That year, Post Cereals, anticipating that the ad push would boost sales of their Raisin Bran cereal, bought up more raisins. By about 10% of the previous year's U.S. sales.

The rest of that year? Sales were flat. And the second year of the campaign, when the nation was gripped by California Raisins fever? Flat again. Not even the previous year's 10% bump, as Post, seeing no increase in Raisin Bran sales as a result of the ad blitz, had returned to their previous purchase level.

Just two quick years after the animated Raisins had begun their assault on American consumers, the campaign had burned through eighty million dollars, countless people had "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" on a permanent playback loop in their heads, and a cottage merchandising industry had made a fortune off licensed California Raisin products.

But sales of actual raisins had remained as flat as a dried grape...and the California Raisin Advisory Board was history—bankrupt and out of business.

So how is it that, today as then, this campaign is widely considered a tremendous advertising success story? The California Raisins campaign generated a ton of noise—in today's terms, it went viral in a big way. And it seems to be human nature to *mistake noise for results*.

Rather than looking deeper, at the measurable results of the campaign, we're content to interpret the level of noise, the media and consumer attention a campaign receives, as the measure of its success.

So what's the lesson? When you're setting up a marketing campaign, *know your goals*.

It's hard to know whether you've succeeded if you haven't defined what success will look like. Next, *measure your progress toward those goals*. And then? *Be prepared to act on the information those measurements give you*—adjust the campaign's focus, fine-tune it, even drop it if that's the best course. We're not arguing that virality (virulence? viralness? virality?) is a bad thing. As long as the attention it draws to your brand or product is positive, viral is good. Viral boosts your profile and your visibility.

But if you stop to congratulate yourself after your roller-skating-monkey video gets its millionth hit and you don't bother looking at whether that popularity has translated to sales of the product it's tied to, then you're just a higher-profile, higher-visibility business with the same sales you had before.



Consider the very funny spots that California dairy farmers have been running for a few years: "Great Milk Comes from Happy Cows."

Funny enough to hold your attention? Probably. But will they *really* make you stop to check the milk label when you're grocery shopping to see which brand comes from California? Seems unlikely. Over twenty years later, it seems no one (at least in California) has learned their lesson.