

Return of the Flemoids

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WOMANWISE



Just last week, I received yet another email from a diehard fan of a short-term consumer promotion we spearheaded 12 years ago as part of a branding assignment for Chex cereal. Yes, you read that right—the email was from a consumer who is a fan of a cereal-box giveaway campaign that ran for six weeks back in 1996.

His name was Alex, and as with the scores of others who have contacted me with amazing frequency over the past dozen years, he was both passionate and personal. He talked about how much

he loved this marketing initiative and how he craved more information about it.

The object of Alex's undying devotion was a CD-ROM game called ChexQuest that was in-packed in 5.7 million boxes of Chex cereal. In the game, the hero is the *Chex Warrior*, whose job was to fly to the planet Bazoik to save the citizens taken

captive by *Flemoids* and use his *zorcher* to send those evil, *flem*-slinging creatures back into their own dimension. (see sidebar)

General Mills thought it was a brilliant idea because we were giving away a custom-designed interactive game that was a \$35 retail value, making it the highest-value toy ever offered in a box of cereal.

We were able to do this partly because AOL covered the cost of stamping out all of those CD-

ROMs in return for including a free trial subscription on the disc. The idea was also possible because we were able to license the DOOM game engine program, the most popular game at the time, from id Software at relatively low cost.

ChexQuest was a huge success. What was intended to be a three-month promotion flew off retailer shelves in the first six weeks. The brand secured a 295 percent increase in incremental sales, a 48 percent increase in share points and 42 million free offline PR impressions.

That was supposedly the beginning and the end because this was, after all, just a promotion. But Alex and his cohorts know nothing of the marketing dogma that pigeonholes promotions as short-term and devoid of any ability to build a brand's identity, much less its equity. All Alex knows is that he loves ChexQuest and, 12 years later, still can't get enough of it. Alex is not alone, to say the least. Try Googling "ChexQuest" and you will yield 31,300 results, topped by a Wikipedia page packed with details about the game!

Also at the top of the first page of Google results are full-blown fan forums and web communities, led by chexquest.org, where fans not only profess their love for the game but also post updates and even create their own sequels. Some have created their own

How ChexQuest turned brand involvement into emotional commitment

“television commercials” about ChexQuest as well as other videos, 42 of which you can find on YouTube.

WHY THIS PASSION?

What was it about ChexQuest that fostered this kind of passion? The answer is evident in our thinking at the time we created ChexQuest. We were thinking that the best way to connect with consumers was to find a way to immerse them in a brand experience that engages their minds and excites their emotions.

ChexQuest created a participatory environment in which consumers formed emotional bonds and, with them, a stronger commitment to the brand. By creating a videogame in which the brand itself is the star (not just an “extra”) and the consumer is in control, it is unlike anything that can be accomplished in a 30-second television commercial—no matter how many millions of dollars you put behind it.

The difference is, ChexQuest made more than a consumer impression. It captured imaginations in a way that motivated willing participation. It involved sight, sound and touch, quickened the pulse and

maybe even touched the soul. It allowed the consumer to soar to new, undiscovered galaxies, where kids and adults alike could be the hero they dreamed of, immersing themselves as the Chex Warrior, day after day, month after month.

ChexQuest put the consumer in control of the experience, deciding when, where and how to play it, and what the outcome would be. In many cases, the consumer chose to re-live that experience over and over and over again. In some cases, they did so for the next 12 years. And General Mills didn’t have to pay one red cent for that kind of astonishing frequency.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

These people are what we normally would call “consumers.” In this case, they were both kids and adults. The kids were about six years old at the time and this was their first exposure to a videogame—a non-violent videogame with a health-and-wellness message, which was also a key part of our thinking. We also took care that ChexQuest would not only meet the approval of moms and dads, but also be a sufficiently challenging game format that appealed to adults, as well.

The ChexQuest Adventure

ChexQuest opens with a full-screen animated movie that sets the storyline and introduces the challenge as the players eavesdrop on a meeting of the “Intergalactic Federation of Cereals.”

The challenge: You, the consumer, are the Chex Warrior and your mission is to zorch the denizens of evil slime back to their own dimension—or be slimed trying. If you succeed, you will save the Intergalactic Federation of Cereals from Flemoidus Maximus and his sticky cronies and you get to enter the next level on your quest for good over glue. But if you fail, you must start the game over.

The players: *Chex Warrior* leads the Chex Squadron, an intergalactic SWAT team called in to quell disputes

along the Federation’s deep space frontiers. Still considered “quiet and unassuming” by his many friends, the denizens of intergalactic evil know better than to mess with him. Everyone, that is, except... *The Flemoids*. Composed of a slimy green substance, the Flemoids are transformed into monstrous aliens when exposed to Chex cereal or other nutritional substances. The IFC team of nutritional researchers and citizens have been imprisoned by a Flemoid hatch in a small dank room, deep within the dark recesses of Bazoik’s lower caverns!

The passion: *Fan Forums:* <http://www.ChexQuest.org>
Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chex_Quest



Twelve years later you can Google “ChexQuest” and you will yield 31,300 results.

This message-board post from a ChexQuest fan using the screen name “Batmanifestdestiny” helps tell the story:

“I remember almost screaming when I saw the first Flemoid, then giggling in joy when I zorched it, and I remember the adrenaline rush in level 2, when I would turn a corner and hear the familiar “mneh!” of the Flemoids... it was the best game experience that I have had in a LONG, LONG, time.”

ChexQuest may not have changed anyone’s life, but because it was a first experience with technology and gaming, ChexQuest is at the very least a fond memory, and a memory with Chex cereal at the center.

What ChexQuest did change was how consumers thought about Chex, transforming it from just another breakfast cereal into an adventure. It created a whole new association for the brand in a holistic sense. They were no longer just consumers of Chex cereal; they were Chex Warriors. That’s what made ChexQuest so powerful. It turned mere consumption into real commitment.

IT’S ALL ABOUT ENGAGEMENT

It’s all about letting consumers be part of the brand on their own terms, on their own time. That is just as true today—maybe even more so—as it was 12 years ago. What’s stunning is that, while many brands talk about brand engagement and putting the

consumer in control, so very few actually do so to the extent that ChexQuest did.

ChexQuest contained no intrusive brand interruptions within the game. There were no direct brand pitches. Instead, the brand message was interwoven into the medium itself; the message and the game environment were one and the same. And most important, the

storyline was tightly aligned to the Chex brand equity.

However, don’t mistake our strategy as passive selling. It was an experience where kids and adults were at the controls. Brand acceptance and consumer commitment grew as the emotional intensity of the game mounted, fully immersing them into the story, facing triumphs and failures along the way. This kind of brand involvement elicits consumer commitment and loyalty.

When ChexQuest was created all those years ago, the Web was in its infancy, and few had a firm concept of where it was all headed. Today, the notion of creating

communities that immerse consumers in a brand experience is all the rage. Brands like General Mills might spend millions of dollars figuring out what that community should look like and trying to build it from scratch. The irony is that their community is right there in front of them, begging for a little attention. These consumers are so hungry that they’re even making their own games and videos to go with them!

GRAB YOUR ZORCHERS

My guess is that General Mills thinks this is just some sort of fringe group and too small to bother with. That would be a mistake. In fact, Malcolm Gladwell wrote an entire book (that you may have heard of) about how small groups of people can explode into huge movements. An intense response from a relatively small group is often an indication of larger interest.

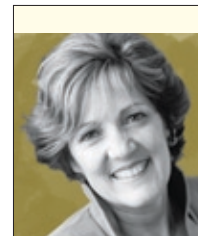
General Mills would be surprised and delighted by the response if they revived ChexQuest, and this time instead of viewing it as a short-term promotion, treating it as part of their long-term brand identity and equity. Instead of using “frequency” and “sales lift” as the only yardsticks of its effectiveness, they might take the full measure of ChexQuest’s impact in terms of its *deep soul connection* and lasting relevance over time.

Wherever there’s intense emotion, there is enormous potential for a brand.

The ChexQuest phenomenon actually raises important questions for every marketer: Do you really know where your brand communities are? Do you really know what your brand identity and its equities are? Do you have your own “ChexQuest” tucked away in the back of your brand’s “closet” that’s yearning to breathe free and pump new life into your brand?

Or has your brand identity and equity been slimed by Flemoids who have trapped it in a gooey mix of 30-second commercials, newspaper coupons and other long-forgotten, mind-numbing tactics?

If so, then grab your zorchers and prepare to fly to Bazoik and zap the evil Flemoids back into their own dimension! As the Chex Warrior says in the closing sequence of the ChexQuest game: “Hold the Party Mix—because we haven’t seen the last of the Flemoids!” ■



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