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Wendy's tests new line of burgers in Las Vegas

Burgers named after founder promoted with commercials featuring real 'Wendy'

November 9, 2010 | By Mark Brandau

Wendy's is testing a new line of premium burgers in the Las Vegas market named for the chain's founder, Dave Thomas, and promoting them with commercials starring his daughter.

Dave's Hot 'N Juicy Cheeseburgers feature a thicker, quarter-pound patty and new ingredients like crinkle-cut pickles on a buttered, toasted bun. The upgraded burgers are being advertised in Las Vegas as single-, double- and triple-patty varieties and are being tested at different prices, said Denny Lynch, the chain's senior vice president of communications.

The advertising campaign being tested in Las Vegas marks a return to form for Dublin, Ohio-based Wendy's. The first of three commercials for Dave's Hot 'N Juicy Cheeseburger debuted Nov. 8 starring another familiar face from the Thomas family, Dave's daughter Wendy.

While she no longer sports the pigtails from the Wendy's logo, the brand's namesake pitches the new burgers by talking about her father, who opened the first Wendy's in 1969 and appeared in all the brand's commercials from 1989 until his death in 2002.

Since that time, Wendy's has searched for continuity in its marketing efforts, going through several advertising agencies and campaigns before rolling out its current quality-focused positioning, "You Know When It's Real," developed by its lead creative agency, Kaplan Thaler Group.

Wendy's new-product pipeline has been active since the brand merged with former Arby's parent Triarc Cos. to form Wendy's/Arby's Group in 2008. New products include last year's introduction of boneless wings and the rollout this year of four new premium salads. Dave's Hot 'N Juicy Cheeseburgers would give the nation's No. 3 hamburger brand an answer to McDonald's Angus Third Pounders and Burger King's Steakhouse XT.

A report in the Las Vegas Sun said Las Vegas is the only test market for the new burgers and a national rollout is expected in June 2011. However, Lynch told Nation's Restaurant News that an analyst is speculating about that date and added that Wendy's is "a long way from deciding" whether the burgers would go systemwide.

Industry marketing executive Gary Stibel, chief executive of the New England Consulting Group, said developing new products and positioning them as innovative — which he cited as a major reason for quick-service leader McDonald's success over the past few years while Burger King and Wendy's have struggled — is a good strategy to turn sales around.

But the execution of the campaign has struck him as lackluster, he said.

"Naming your best product after the founder has credibility, but they haven't made the sandwich look that much better than the competition," Stibel said. "No. 2, the way they've involved Dave does not

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recognize the man the way it could have."

Referencing Dave Thomas in new commercials is a good idea, Stibel said, but he thought the execution came off "benign" because the script has Wendy Thomas speaking of her father the way any spokesperson could. He added that while Wendy Thomas is the daughter of the brand's founder and a Wendy's franchisee, she is not an "aspirational" spokesperson with the status of an actress or celebrity or the authority of a gourmet chef.

"It's a throwaway," Stibel said. "There are no tears in her eyes and no emotion. This [product] could have been lofted up as a tribute to one of the last, great hamburger restaurateurs, but it comes off as just another burger, this time from Wendy's."

Wendy's most recent earnings results included a 1.7-percent decrease in same-store sales for the North American system for the second quarter ended July 4, although chief executive Roland Smith projected a return to positive same-store sales in the third quarter. The brand reports third-quarter earnings Nov. 12. Wendy's has more than 6,600 restaurants worldwide.

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