

British Brands

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE BRITISH BRANDS GROUP

Barr's Irn-Bru: one hundred years young

The Leith Agency, for Barr Soft Drinks

2001 marks the hundredth birthday of Irn-Bru, 'Scotland's other national drink'. More than this, the year sees standard Irn-Bru in pole position as the biggest-selling grocery brand in Scotland – ahead of such international grocery giants as Walkers Crisps, Persil and Nescafé. There are very few countries in the world where the leading cola is outsold by another soft drink brand, but Scotland is one of them.

Clearly, the distinctive flavour of Irn-Bru appeals to the Scottish palate, but the scale of the brand's success is out of all proportion to the level of sales a non-mainstream soft drink flavour can normally expect. So how does Irn-Bru manage to punch so far above its weight?

Primarily the product itself is unique. There is literally nothing else like Irn-Bru. Nothing else tastes like it, or even looks like it. The recipe remains a closely guarded secret. For Scots of all ages, it is a reminder of their childhood; for those abroad, it is the taste of home.

But it is easy for brands with such a strong heritage to lose contemporary relevance. Latent brand affinity isn't always transferred into sales. The brand ends up very much loved but not very often purchased. Shrewd marketing has helped Irn-Bru avoid this fate.

By the middle of the nineties, Barr wished to grow the brand in England. Research showed that the 'Made in Scotland from Girders' campaign was extremely successful in Scotland, but this success didn't transfer to the English market. We had to re-create the advertising so that the English consumer, who had not grown up with the brand for the past 90 years, could also relate to it.

The key was to adopt the right personality for Irn-Bru. The Barr brand team began visiting schools to find out what teenagers were talking about, and in particular what made them laugh. This had advantages over traditional research

methods. Whereas in a research group teenagers can easily turn surly and uncommunicative, in school they are expected to contribute their own ideas and opinions. Consequently, exploring strategic and creative marketing ideas in the classroom produced a notably more dynamic set of responses.

This kind of initiative helped to get under the skin of Irn-Bru. As a result a uniquely compelling personality for the brand has been developed over time.

Since Irn-Bru itself tastes like nothing else in the world, the marketing of the brand had to do justice to it. But in talking to its biggest fans, we realised that no two kids described Irn-Bru in the same way. The marketing of the brand would have to enhance, not deny, this indescribable character. The best description we found was 'likeable maverick' – a self-confident, unconventional and independent character who wouldn't think or behave in quite the same way as other people. As a character type this description of the brand has a great deal in common with the way our teenage audience itself likes to be perceived. And maverick is also a very apt description of what we sought to achieve in the marketing. Competing against brands with much bigger budgets, Irn-Bru has to shout to be heard. And the best way to do that is constantly to surprise people.

These insights have been used to inspire the creativity of Irn-Bru's marketing activity at all levels, from website design to carefully tailored sponsorships, to above-the-line advertising. The maverick tone of voice has proven flexible enough to produce award-winning advertising on radio, posters and TV. On TV, from the 'See What Irn-Bru Can Do For You' campaign to the current award-winning work, Irn-Bru's advertising has been consistently among the most popular and talked about with its teenage target audience.

Because Irn-Bru's marketing is based on genuine consumer insight, not nostalgia, it works



just as well south of the border too. Scots have always loved Irn-Bru – now the gap is closing as English teenagers increasingly adopt a brand that speaks to them as well. Irn-Bru sales in England now account for almost a quarter of total volume. And Irn-Bru's brand image has improved dramatically in England wherever the campaign has been seen.

So long as marketing continues to keep the brand young, there is every reason to suppose that Irn-Bru can enjoy another hundred years of healthy growth.

Brand dates

3 October, The Scottish Brands Conference, Edinburgh
30 October, The Innov8 Conference, London
5 December 6pm, The Brands Lecture, London

For more information on these events, contact the British Brands Group on 07020 934250 or info@britishbrandsgroup.com

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