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**Cracker Jack Wants to Break Out of the Ballpark**

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By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

IT would be impossible to put a dollar value on how much [“Take Me Out to the Ball Game,”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drOdOCuWNRY) the 1908 song ritually sung by baseball fans during the seventh-inning stretch, has had for the 121-year-old snack named in the refrain, “Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack.” But in a segment for “On the Media,” the syndicated public radio show produced by WNYC, Mike Pesca once tried to [assess the value](http://www.onthemedia.org/story/131592-crackerjack/transcript/), equating it with Cracker Jack placing an advertisement along outfield walls of all of the major league’s 30 stadiums, a marketing campaign that would cost the brand about $25 million a year.

But Cracker Jack has done little actual advertising in recent years, spending only $62,000 on advertising in 2013 and nothing in 2012, according to the Kantar Media unit of WPP.

“The brand has kind of been dark for a while,” said Ram Krishnan, the senior vice president of marketing at [PepsiCo](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/pepsico_inc/index.html?inline=nyt-org), which has owned Cracker Jack within its Frito-Lay snack division since 1997.

Now the company is about to promote Cracker Jack, but to reach its target consumer of mothers aged 25 to 45, the company is initiating a Facebook campaign rather than a traditional advertising push. The campaign, called “The Surprise Inside Project,” plays off the fact that Cracker Jack is known for the prize inside its box. The contest asks Facebook users to request creative surprises for friends and family, with a value of up to $20. In promotional materials, the brand suggests that within the realm of requests might be a gift certificate to go out for ice cream or a set of squirt guns and balloons for a group water fight.

Photo



Cracker Jack, known for prizes, will ask Facebook users to offer ideas to surprise friends or family.

Participants can make requests on a form through the brand’s Facebook page or at [CrackerJack.com](http://crackerjack.com/) from Thursday through July 31. Brand representatives will evaluate the requests based on originality, affordability and how much fun they seem to be. In all, 200 winners will be selected, meaning the brand will actually procure the items and deliver them in a box that resembles a Cracker Jack box. Winners are being encouraged to take photographs and video of prizes being presented, and to post them using the hashtag #CJSurprise to social media like Twitter, Vine or Instagram.

The brand declined to disclose the cost of the promotion.

“In the past the way we would have relaunched a brand like Cracker Jack is with a big advertising campaign,” said Mr. Krishnan, of PepsiCo. “But when we talked to who our consumer is, that didn’t make a lot of sense because we really wanted to engage in a two-way conversation with them — and hence a social media campaign anchored around Facebook.”

What makes the Facebook campaign challenging, however, is that Cracker Jack has only [103,000 followers](https://www.facebook.com/crackerjack?ref=br_tf) on the social network, a fraction of other Frito-Lay brands like [Doritos](https://www.facebook.com/DoritosUSA?fref=pb&hc_location=profile_browser), with 12 million followers, or [Cheetos](https://www.facebook.com/Cheetos?fref=pb&hc_location=profile_browser), with 1.3 million.

To attract participants, the brand is teaming up with [Liz Gumbinner](http://mom-101.com/about), the blogger behind Mom-101, and co-founder of the websites Cool Mom Picks and Cool Mom Tech. Ms. Gumbinner will help promote the effort by posting about it on Cool Mom Picks, on Twitter and on Facebook. “Where we are today does not give us the scale we were looking for,” said Mr. Krishnan, referring to the number of Cracker Jack Facebook followers, “and hence our partnership with Liz.”

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The Surprise Inside Project kicks off with an event in New York’s Herald Square that will feature oversize Cracker Jack boxes, one more than 15 feet tall, that will contain prizes that will be distributed to children. Cracker Jack had $51 million in sales — not counting what it sells in ballparks — for the 52 weeks that ended May 19, according to IRI, a market data firm. The brand declined to reveal its ballpark sales totals. In nonballpark retail channels, the brand ranked fourth, behind Smartfood (another Frito-Lay brand), Skinny Pop and Popcorn Indiana.

Cracker Jack also is beginning a three-year sponsorship of the [Macy’s Fourth of July Fireworks](http://social.macys.com/fireworks/?cm_mmc=VanityUrl-_-fireworks-_-n-_-n), which will give the brand exposure in Macy’s print ads for the event, at promotional events and during the telecast of the fireworks display on NBC.

The brand also is rekindling its most nostalgic associations, with a continuing partnership with Major League Baseball that includes team stickers in boxes as prizes. In 2004, Yankee Stadium switched from offering Cracker Jack to another caramel corn brand, Crunch ’N Munch.

“The decision left fans stunned, seething and sugar-deprived,” and Yankee officials “faced a full-fledged fan fiasco,” [wrote](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/19/nyregion/buy-me-some-peanuts-and-hold-on-where-s-the-cracker-jack.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%5b%22RI%3A5%22%2C%22RI%3A16%22%5d) Corey Kilgannon in The New York Times at the time. Two months into the season, Yankee Stadium switched back to Cracker Jack.

While baseball fans’ affection runs deep, Mr. Krishnan said the brand had to strike a balance between nostalgia and today’s snack aisle.

“Nostalgia is good, but it’s a bad thing if you don’t evolve beyond that,” said Mr. Krishnan. “Because otherwise you don’t bring along a new audience to the brand.”

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