

# KFC Toothpaste Case Study

## Introduction to KFC's Fried Chicken-Flavored Toothpaste

Yes, that's right - a fried chicken-flavored toothpaste - it's a real product launched by KFC in 2025.

Given that the toothpaste was launched on April 1 (April Fools' Day), it does sound like an April Fools' prank rather than a legitimate new product. Yet, this product was real - and it sold out in a very short timeframe.

In this case study, we'll explore what motivated KFC (from a brand and marketing perspective) to create and launch a product that is very inconsistent with their existing product lines of fried chicken and other related take-away food products. Sure, the toothpaste was fried chicken-flavored, but that's where the overlap ends. As we know, KFC are in the ready-to-eat food business, specializing in fried chicken, chicken burgers, and fries, and the like.

So, as marketing students, let's dig in and work out the what and why of KFC's marketing strategy and why the product was so popular among consumers.

## Overview of the Toothpaste Launch

### The Product Release

On April 1 2025, KFC unveiled a fried chicken-flavored toothpaste developed in partnership with Hismile (an oral care brand), which was described as, *"a limited-edition, fluoride-free paste infused with KFC's 11 herbs and spices."* In addition, they also announced the availability of a KFC-branded electric toothbrush, described as *"a rechargeable brush in the red-and-white KFC livery featuring Colonel Sanders graphics and three cleaning modes."*

The very date of the announcement April Fools' Day - led to speculation that it might be a prank. The timing of this date is a key component in the launch, as combining novelty products with April Fools' Day guaranteed additional earned media as people discussed whether the product was indeed real or not - a smart move in the campaign.

But it turned out that the products were real, with KFC releasing a limited number of toothpaste tubes for sale online for around US\$13 each, with the co-branded electric toothbrush offered at a higher price point of US\$59.



### **The Sales Reaction**

As you might expect, this offbeat product offering triggered immediate and significant discussion on social media. As it coincided with April Fools' Day, many people sought to verify its authenticity, creating a flurry of conversations on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

This level of interest, plus its limited availability, meant that within approximately 48 hours the entire toothpaste production run had sold out. This drove earned media and social buzz even further, with people complaining that they had missed out on a great "collectible" item, as well as major news networks, websites, and influencers, all amplifying KFC's "bizarre" new product and its "surprising" success.

### **But KFC Had Been Down this Road Before**

We should bring in at this point in the case that this is not KFC's first foray into novelty products that taste like chicken. And some ten years before, KFC had introduced edible chicken-flavored nail polish in Hong Kong.

That campaign generated significant earned media too, although on a smaller scale than the toothpaste product, primarily due to the increased use of social media platforms and that the toothpaste had a wider global release.

The nail polish slogan was "Finger Lickin' Good" (note: this was pre-Covid) - and consumers were encouraged to apply the polish, then lick it, and then experience the taste of KFC's fried chicken recipe on their nails - in two flavors of original and hot & spicy.

And although it was only available in Hong Kong, the nail polish garnered heavy social media discussion internationally, demonstrating (to KFC) the marketing potential of novelty-style products that help reinforce their brand positioning.



### **The Brand Impact**

When we consider these two new products together, in tandem, we can see a pattern in KFC's marketing approach. The brand is deliberately playful, unafraid to venture far from its typical domain of fried chicken meals, provided that there is some underpinning of their brand positioning, along with the ability to create significant brand interest at a low cost by leveraging earned media.

Both the toothpaste and the nail polish tapped into *curiosity, humor, and a slight shock factor*, not because KFC actually wanted to enter the consumer goods or cosmetics markets long-term, but rather to spark a social media buzz and remind consumers that KFC is a fun, likeable, energetic, and modern fast-food brand.

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### **Marketing Benefits Delivered**

Now we have the big picture story, let's dig into the marketing impacts of the toothpaste product, to help understand the brand's goals and outcomes.

#### **Reinforcing Brand Personality and Positioning**

Over the years, KFC has cultivated a brand personality that balances tradition (the Colonel Sanders heritage) with a flair for irreverent humor. Fried chicken is a "fun" family food, so it is important that the brand image reflects that positioning.

Products like chicken-flavored toothpaste (and edible nail polish) help bring that playful brand personality to life. As we saw by the sales success of the toothpaste, KFC's use of an unexpected new product, humor and even "shock value" appeared to resonate with the market overall, and especially with their loyal customer base.

From a brand positioning perspective, launching these novelty items underscores that KFC is not merely a fast-food chain. Instead, it can be viewed as a "cultural icon" that engages consumers beyond just their purchase of chicken meals, verging into brand entertainment and excitement.

And in an era where consumer attention is a highly valuable commodity for brands, KFC's ability to create storylines and continued interest in the brand provides them with a competitive strength in the marketplace.

### **Generating Earned Media**

A clear intention and successful outcome of these unusual product combinations is the volume of earned media coverage they have been able to produce. When KFC launched the toothpaste, many websites, media outlets, specialized marketing publications, bloggers, YouTubers and other influencers picked up the story with headlines like "Finger-Lickin' Fresh Breath," and "Mint Is Out, Chicken Is In".

As we know, earned media is a form of free advertising because the brand is not paying for the spots and the profile. And, as a result, the brand name is effectively promoted to potentially millions of consumers across the globe. Similarly, when KFC introduced nail polish in Hong Kong, it also garnered significant earned media due to its novelty factor, being built around "Edible, If You Dare."

### **Earned Media Estimates**

Here are some broad estimates of the earned media from the campaign (as at late April 2025 = after 3 weeks):

- Approximately 75 million TikTok video views across the top campaign hashtags (#KFCToothpaste, #HismileXKFC, #KFCxHismile).
- Over 3,000 online/broadcast news stories across at least 35 countries
- Total impressions estimated at around 1 billion
- Giving a rough earned media value of US \$12 million
- Note: earned media value is the equivalent advertising cost of this level of exposure

### **User-Generated Content**

Along with earned media spreading the brand name and the toothpaste flavor, this type of product combination is ideal for social media and the creation of fun content. In this case, the KFC toothpaste inspired individuals to post unboxing videos, product reviews, and memes. Some simply took pictures of the toothpaste tube next to a bucket of KFC chicken, inviting likes and retweets from followers.

Others staged comedic “taste tests,” describing the experience of brushing with fried chicken–flavored paste in exaggerated detail for comedic effect. These user-driven “mini-advertisements” or “micro-influences” multiplied the campaign’s impact substantially.

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## Long-Term Brand and Business Impact

Now let's turn to a bigger, and most important, question: Does this toothpaste product and campaign deliver any business benefit to KFC and its brand?

It is clear that both the toothpaste and nail polish are short-term limited-edition products. They are never going to be a permanent or substantial income stream for KFC. They were interesting and unusual flavor and product combinations purely designed for brand publicity (earned media) and brand image reinforcement (positioning).

As both products were produced in limited runs, they are effectively *collectibles* for dedicated consumers. This is not uncommon for well-known brands who will often introduce memorabilia products for special company milestones (e.g. 100 years of the brand) or special events (e.g. Olympic Games etc.).

And because these novelty products are perceived by consumers as a sense fun and "tongue-in-cheek", they are not seen as real, everyday products - but more of a promotional product only. Therefore, they differ from normal new products and line extensions that a brand may introduce. Their goal is to energize and spark interest in the brand, rather than a serious effort in brand building (as would be the case in most brand extension strategies).

We could summarize their marketing objectives, in this case, as:

- To reinforce brand awareness (it is already high, so it just helps with top-of-mind awareness)
- To generate earned media in order to enhance brand likeability
- To tap into the world of influencers by providing a fun topic to blog and vlog about (part of earned media)
- To encourage and drive user-generated content (also part of earned media)
- To improve consumer attitudes towards the brand, by being seen as fun and playful
- To strengthen brand loyalty among existing customers

Looking this list of marketing objectives, it could be argued that the chicken-flavored toothpaste would have a beneficial impact on the brand. Although it is unlikely to lead to a jump in sales of fast-food in KFC stores, it is similar to any other brand building campaign in its outcomes.

The advantage of this novel approach is that the cost of campaign is relatively low due to the amount of earned media generated - which, as we know, is usually much lower than traditional advertising.

## Quick Note on Brand Extensions

KFC toothpaste can be classified as a form of *brand extension*. Typically, brand extensions occur when a brand expands into new product categories - but usually into somewhat related product categories.

In this case, KFC's toothpaste expansion crosses into a completely foreign product category (personal care and cosmetics). In most cases, such an inconsistent brand extension would be best avoided as it is likely to damage the brand's reputation and dilute its brand positioning.

However, given the structure of this product and campaign, we would not consider it to be a genuine brand extension, but rather a *symbolic brand extension*, where the brand's extension is primarily perceived as a marketing tactic only - resulting in a limited risk of damaging the brand.

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## A Review of Consumer Behavior

It is clear as to why influencers and everyday consumers would discuss and promote the KFC toothpaste online, simply because it is such a fun and unexpected product that is tailor made for clicks and eyeballs - but why did the toothpaste sell out in less than two days? To work that out, let's breakdown some key aspects of consumer behavior.

Here is a list of reasons as to why consumers were motivated to spend \$13 on a tube of toothpaste that tastes like fried chicken:

- **Curiosity:** The mere fact that this product exists is so unexpected that people buy in simply to satisfy their curiosity.
- **Exclusivity:** The KFC toothpaste was announced as a *limited edition product*. In a social media era, missing out on a novelty can fuel the "fear of missing out" (FOMO) and encourage impulse buys.
- **Snowballing Effect:** Early purchasers posted images and videos, encouraging others to also grab the KFC toothpaste while it was still available, either for a sense of group fun or bragging rights among friends or online.
- **Brand Affinity:** Superfans love collecting branded merchandise. Even if the product seems impractical or downright odd, it can become a cherished part of a fan's personal brand relics, similar to limited-edition shoes or event merchandise.
- **Mini-Influencers:** Lots of everyday people are on TikTok, YouTube, and the like, as part of their side hustle - so this KFC product was ideal to feature on one of their clips or product reviews, making them one of the first to buy.
- **Reselling Opportunities:** Unfortunately, popular limited edition products often create the opportunity for profits by buying and reselling (as we see with concert tickets, for example).

Therefore, as we can see from the above list, the toothpaste purchasers were not necessarily KFC customers, but tended to also include:

- Influencers
- Entrepreneurs
- Collectors
- Individuals wanting to be part of the fun or obtain a hard-to-get item
- Individuals who wanted the product to share and trial with friends and family - like a taste-test exercise

Based on this breakdown of "target markets", it would have been likely to KFC that there would be significant demand for the toothpaste, leading to a "sold out" situation, which would then result in even more earned media and publicity benefits.

### Wrap-Up

KFC's fried chicken-flavored toothpaste, plus its edible nail polish in Hong Kong, demonstrate how a brand can use quirky products to create substantial earned media. Despite seemingly being "off-brand" at first glance, these products could be seen as supporting the brand's identity.

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## Student Discussion Questions

1. Based on the KFC toothpaste product only - does it change your perception of KFC in any way and does it make you more/same/less likely to be a KFC customer?
2. To what extent do you agree with this statement: *"Unexpected products like chicken-flavored toothpaste and nail polish help reinforce KFC's brand positioning of being a fun, likeable, energetic, and modern fast-food brand"*.
3. KFC launched these items years apart (the nail polish around a decade ago, the toothpaste more recently). What might have changed in the marketing landscape that made the toothpaste campaign so globally viral? What role do you think new social media platforms (e.g., TikTok) played compared to the earlier era of social platforms?
4. Given that this has been done by KFC before (with the nail polish ad now the toothpaste) - do you think that if KFC was to bring out another novel product in a few more years that it would be able to generate the same level of earned media?
5. Review the list of consumer behavior triggers listed above, as well as the likely list of purchasers. Are these factors unique to KFC's novelty products, or can they incorporate them into their ongoing marketing activities?
6. Review the list of marketing objectives above - classify them into whether they would be likely to have a major/minor/no impact on the brand in the longer term. Based on your classification, discuss the marketing value of this product/campaign to KFC.
7. Based upon your response to the previous question, if you were KFC's CMO, would you have approved the toothpaste product campaign? Why/why not?