Taco Bell Features Real-Life Ronald McDonalds in Ads

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This frame grab from video provided by Taco Bell via Taylor Strategy shows Ronald McDonald of Oak Ridge, N.C., in a Taco Bell commercial. The fast-food chain will begin airing ads Thursday, March 27, 2014, that feature everyday men who happen to have the same name as the McDonald's mascot. The marketing campaign is intended to promote Taco Bell's new breakfast menu, which features novelties like a waffle taco. **(AP Photo/Taco Bell via Taylor Strategy)**

NEW YORK (AP) — Taco Bell is name-dropping an unlikely clown to promote its new breakfast menu [1] — Ronald McDonald.

The fast-food chain began airing ads Thursday that feature everyday men who happen to have the same name as the McDonald's mascot known for his bright red hair and yellow jumpsuit. The marketing campaign is intended to promote Taco Bell [2]'s new breakfast menu, which features novelties like a waffle taco.

The chain, owned by Yum Brands Inc. of Louisville, Ky., is looking to boost sales by opening most of its roughly 6,000 U.S. stores a few hours earlier at 7 a.m. starting this week.

But Taco Bell has a long way to go to catch up with McDonald's, the No. 1 player in breakfast with 31 percent of the category, according to market researcher Technomic. Egg McMuffins and other items have been consistent sellers for McDonald's over the years, with breakfast accounting for about 20 percent of the company's U.S. sales.

By comparison, a Yum executive has said breakfast accounted for just 4 percent of sales when it was being tested at Taco Bell stores in select markets. That was before national marketing began, however, and Taco Bell President Brian Niccol said

in a phone interview that the goal was to get the figure to a level "much greater than that."

Niccol concedes that the real-life Ronald McDonalds were paid for their appearances in the ads, but insists their enthusiastic reactions to the food were real.

"All of them resoundingly loved the food," he said.

Taco Bell's ad agency, Deutsch LA, found around 400 men and women with the name Ronald McDonald, Ronnie McDonald or some variation, Niccol said. A couple of dozen were selected to represent different regions around the country including Bossier City, La.; Chicago; Dubuque, Iowa; Kane, Pa.; and Worcester, Ma.

The men show their approval of the food with comments like, "It's not messy" and "Mmm, wow" and "Mmm, real good" and "It has everything I like."

In case it wasn't clear, tiny print at the end of the ad notes that, "These Ronald McDonalds are not affiliated with McDonald's Corporation and were individually selected as paid endorsers of Taco Bell Breakfast."

"We like to do things with a wink and smile," Niccol said. "We have a sense of humor."

As for Ronald McDonald the fast-food clown, the character was first played by Willard Scott in 1963. He was initially depicted as a character that magically pulled hamburgers out of his belt. But the mascot eventually became a target of critics who say McDonald's uses him to market to kids.

A representative for McDonald's Corp. did not respond to a request for comment.

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