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Free Advertising on a Stick

More than a passing fad, company-branded antenna balls boost the bottom line

SAN DIEGO - It's no secret that companies spend millions, even billions, each year on advertising. But while ad executives log long hours devising new ways to convince consumers to buy their clients' products, some companies have discovered the marketing and branding power of a simple foam ball.

Antenna balls first appeared on cars back in the fad-loving 1960s. But like mood rings, pet rocks and shag carpeting, antenna balls quietly disappeared into the annals of kitsch. But in recent years, antenna balls have made a comeback, as companies, amusement parks, sports teams, even presidential candidates, have discovered their economic and reputation-building benefits.

An originator of the current antenna topper trend has been San Diego-based Jack in the Box® restaurants, which started offering antenna balls featuring the likeness of its fictional founder, "Jack," in 1995. Simple in design, the fast-food chain's original antenna topper captured Jack's ever-present grin, pointy nose and trademarked yellow hat cocked at an angle atop his head. Jack in the Box quickly recognized that it struck brand-building gold with the simple antenna topper.

"The antenna ball is an incredible marketing tool for Jack in the Box," said Greg Joumas, division vice president of advertising. "It has proved to be an inexpensive, but effective means of promoting our brand to the public. Our icon, Jack, has a faithful following, and the antenna ball provides them a fun token for their cars, while giving the company a mobile billboard that could possibly be seen by thousands of people."

Jack in the Box didn't stop with its original antenna topper design. To prepare its guests for Y2K, Jack in the Box introduced its Millennium Ball complete with a party hat and noisemaker. Three million Millennium Balls were sold during the three-and-a-half week promotion. More recently, the cheery foam ball donned yellow earmuffs and a dapper scarf before venturing out as the Holiday Ball. To date, the company has sold 17 million antenna balls.

Like bumper stickers, antenna toppers reflect a vehicle owner's personality and tastes. And with the vast array of antenna toppers available these days, everything from disco balls to ice cream cones, car owners should have no problem in finding one that defines them. Antenna toppers have grown so much in popularity that they have even bounced onto the online auction site eBay, where on any given day hundreds of antenna toppers are available to the highest bidder.

As companies scramble to find new ways to get the most bang for their advertising buck, there's no telling where the antenna topper trend might lead. But for now, antenna top advertising is riding high.

Founded in 1951, Jack in the Box Inc. is the nation's first major drive-thru hamburger chain. With systemwide sales of nearly \$2 billion, the San Diego-based company operates or franchises more than 1,700 quick-service restaurants in 16 states and has more than 41,000 employees.