Sweethearts Situationships

E-10620-704

Gold | Youth Marketing - Products

Effie United States 2025

Brand

Sweethearts

Client

Spangler Candy Company

Lead Agency

Tombras

effie Awards United States

Sweethearts Situationships

E-10620-704

Dates Effort Ran

Date From 2024-01-03
Date To 2024-02-14

Regional Classification

National

Industry Sector

Food & Beverages (Non-Alcoholic)

Industry/Category Situation

Growing

The Challenge:

Sweethearts revenue was flat between 2022 and 2023 as competitors crowded shelves with their own conversation hearts.

The Insight:

Gen Z's romantic relationships aren't always clearly defined– these are called "situationships".

The Strategic Idea/Build:

"Situationships" are blurry, just like the printed sayings on some of our Sweethearts candies.

Bringing the Strategy & Idea to Life:

"Sweethearts Situationships" gave Gen Z a playful way to own their situationship on Valentine's Day.

The Results:

Total revenue for Sweethearts grew 30% during Q1 2024.

Why is this entry an outstanding example of effective marketing in this Effie entry category?

Sweethearts is a Valentine's Day icon and the holiday's #1 selling candy.

Production struggles in 2019 and 2020 caused Sweethearts to become vulnerable to competition for the first time in its 123 year history.

This competitive squeeze caused Sweethearts revenue to fall flat in 2022 and 2023.

Our "Sweethearts Situationships" campaign turned a trending relationship term into an unstoppable PR conversation that dominated Valentine's Day season.

"Sweethearts Situationships" delivered over 4 billion earned media impressions over a 6 week window, driving a 30% increase in Sweethearts revenue during Q1 2024.

All with minimal investment.

SCORING SECTION 1: CHALLENGE, CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

1A. Before your effort began, what was the state of the brand's business and the overall category in which it competes? What was the strategic challenge that stemmed from this business situation? Provide context on the degree of difficulty of this challenge.

SWEETHEARTS IS A VALENTINE'S DAY ICON…

Sweethearts has been making conversation hearts for 123 years.

Each box is filled with heart shaped candies, each with a playfully affectionate saying printed on them.

Sweethearts make up approximately 40% of all Valentine's Day candy sold by units and over 11% of all Valentine's Day candy sold by sales, with revenue typically following the yearly rise in consumer spending during this holiday window.

…BUT STRUGGLES WITH PRODUCTION GAVE OUR COMPETITORS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRIKE

The brand was acquired by the candy company Spangler in 2019.

In the years that followed, Sweethearts experienced a series of setbacks & competitive challenges that weakened its dominance in candy hearts:

1. Sweethearts was off shelves in 2019 during the transfer of brand and manufacturing ownership.
2. Production issues in 2020 resulted in fully blank Sweethearts candies– most of the product in boxes was missing the sayings entirely, much to the disappointment of consumers.
3. In 2021 and 2022, several competitors dialed up their presence in the conversation hearts space, most notably Brach's and SweetTarts.
4. In 2023, Brach's launched a limited edition "Friends" themed conversation heart product which dominated shelves and online buzz.

AS RESULT, SWEETHEARTS REVENUE FELL FLAT DURING A TIME WHEN VALENTINE'S DAY SPENDING WAS GROWING

Total consumer spending on Valentine's Day candy grew 10% between 2021 and 2022, and 9.09% between 2022 and 2023.

Sweethearts revenue, however, remained flat over 2022 and 2023.

To defend our leadership position in 2024, we knew we had to keep pace or exceed the rate of consumer spending growth on Valentine's Day candy.

Business Objective

Business Objective # 1

Objective Overview & KPI

Grow total revenue by 10% in 2024

Rationale - Why the objective was selected and what is the benchmark?

Sweethearts revenue had been flat since returning to store shelves in 2020. (1)

Total consumer spending on Valentine's Day candy, however, rose a total of 20% between 2020 and 2023, or approximately 7% annually over the same period. (2)

When looking at just 2022 and 2023, consumer spending on Valentine's Day candy increased 10% and 9% respectively. (2)

Keeping pace with that growth was key to building back momentum and reclaiming our leadership status.

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

Measurement of total Sweethearts revenue growth between in Q1 2024.

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Revenue (growth/maintenance/easing decline/value share)

Marketing Objectives

Marketing Objective # 1

Objective Overview & KPI

Drive Gen Z awareness of Sweethearts during the Valentine's Day 2024 season, surpassing 110 million impressions.

Rationale – Why the objective was selected & what is the benchmark?

Valentine's Day season is a crowded messaging landscape.

We wanted our audience to feel like Sweethearts "owned" Valentines Day 2024 by creating an unmissable conversation around the brand.

Sweetheart 2023 Valentine's Day campaign had earned a total of 26.4 million impressions (3), so we ambitiously quadrupled it to create a goal of 110 million impressions for 2024.

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

Earned and paid impressions tracking, inclusive of social mention tracking

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Salience / Awareness

Activity Objectives

Activity Objective # 1

Objective Overview & KPI

Demonstrate evidence of Gen Z affinity at scale.

Rationale – Why the objective was selected & what is the benchmark?

Sweethearts 2019 qualitative research revealed that the brand had failed to connect with Gen Z.

The brand's themed boxes were seen as struggling to capture the cultural trends in a way that felt authentic to this audience. (4)

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

Tracking positive social mention volume between January 3 and February 14, 2024

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Popularity / Fame / Social Discourse
Positive Sentiment / Emotional Resonance
Reach (e.g. open rate, shares, views, attendance)

DATA SOURCES: Section 1

1. Sweethearts Internal Revenue Tracking: 2020-2024 / Total Revenue

2. National Retail Federation: https://nrf.com/research-insights/holiday-data-and-trends/valentines-day

3. Sweethearts Internal 2023 Valentine's Campaign Performance Report

4. Sweethearts Qualitative Research: October 2019 / 12 focus groups, 2 cities, Gen Z n-24 Millennials-n-24

SCORING SECTION 2: INSIGHTS & STRATEGY

2A. Define the target audience(s) you were trying to reach and explain why it was/they were relevant to the brand and the challenge.

Our target audience for "Sweethearts Situationships" were Gen Z.

This audience represented a sizable spending audience for Valentine's Day candy, spending.

- $15.90 on candy on average during Valentine's Day 2023 (1)

Gen Z has a strong affinity for conversation hearts.

- Our audience uses conversation hearts to show romantic affection (2)
  - 72% of Gen Z
  - 68% of Millennials

- Our audience have used conversation hearts to ask someone out on a date (2)
  - 25% of Gen Z
  - 20% of Millennials

Despite Sweethearts category leadership (3), 2019 Sweethearts primary qualitative research showed the brand had lost relevance among shoppers ages 16-25. (4)

- The classic tone and sayings were cited by some as being "out-of-touch with current culture."

- The most commonly cited the example of Sweethearts "Emoji" box as a misstep in the brand's effort to connect with younger generations.

We knew we needed to build our appeal and relevance among Gen Z in order to grow revenue and build the next generation of brand fans.

2B. Explain the thinking that led you to your insight(s). Clearly state your insight(s) here. Clarify how the insight(s) were directly tied to your brand, your audience's behaviors and attitudes, your

research and/or business situation. How would this unique insight(s) lead to the brand's success and how did it inform your strategic idea.

Sweethearts is a conversation heart candy featuring a new theme of sayings each year.

Each theme is a reflection of the dating & relationships culture that year.

With that in mind, we got to work diving into the relationship culture of Gen Z and Millennials leading up to Valentine's Day 2024.

ONLINE DATING RESHAPED RELATIONSHIPS

Like many things, the rise of online dating and dating apps can be traced back to 2020's global lockdowns during the COVID pandemic. (5)

Apps like Tinder and Bumble all saw downloads spike as users transitioned from in-person dating to online swiping. (6)

We found ourselves navigating a new world of endless texting, meme-sharing and fleeting Zoom calls instead of building relationships around shared experiences and IRL moments. We became used to our relationships feeling less formal and more undefined.

THE RISE OF THE "SITUATIONSHIP"

The term "situationship" was introduced in 2016 & 2017 as a way to describe an emotional and physical relationship that was more than "friends" but less than a "committed relationship". (7)

In 2022, the term found its way into social media culture. And by late 2023, "situationships" became a bonafide phenomenon.

- "Situationship" was the #1 relationship status this audience was using on the dating site Tinder in 2023 (8)
- The term "situationship" was so popular that it qualified as a finalist for Oxford University Press' 2023 "Word of the Year" in Nov 2023 (9)

Our Gen Z and Millennial audience was no stranger to situationships, either. In fact, some embrace them:

- 50% of Gen Z has been in a situationship (10)
- 35% of Gen Z would rather have an undefined romantic relationship vs a defined one (10)

Situationships represented dating culture in 2023-2024 among our Gen Z audience. We had found our insight.

2C. What was the strategic idea or build followed from your insights that enabled you to pivot from challenge to solution for your brand and customer?

Linking our audience's situationships to Sweethearts required looking at our product in a whole new light.

If you've ever opened a box of Sweethearts, you know that the sayings are printed onto each candy the old fashioned way– with a physical stamp, not a computer-guided laser.

As result, some sayings come out clearly, while some are a bit off-center, smudged, or down right blurry.

You know what else is a bit blurry? That's right, "situationships".

Instead of ignoring these blurry Sweetheart candies, we pivoted to make them the star of our campaign by connecting them to the blurriness of our audience's situationships.

Our strategic idea: Situationships can be blurry, just like the sayings on some of our candies.

We celebrated both.

DATA SOURCES: Section 2

1. Capital One Shopping Statistics Report Jan 2, 2024: https://capitaloneshopping.com/research/valentines-day-shopping-statistics

2. Sweethearts Primary Research, Quantitative Survey September 2023 Gen Z and Millennials n-1000

3. Food Network Valentine's Day Report: https://www.foodnetwork.com/fn-dish/news/conversation-heart-candy-history

4. Sweethearts Qualitative Research: October 2019 / 12 focus groups, 2 cities, Gen Z n-24 Millennials-n-24

5. Fortune Editors. Activity on dating apps has surged during the pandemic: https://fortune.com/2021/02/12/covid-pandemic-online-dating-apps-usage-tinder-okcupid-bumble-meet-group

6. Tinder Press Release: Tinder. The future of dating is fluid: https://www.tinderpressroom.com/futureofdating

7. Time: Situationships Are the Future of Dating. That's Not a Bad Thing: https://time.com/6263743/situationships-dating-benefits/#:~:text=Coined%20by%20Carina%20Hsieh%20in,effects%20than%20one%20might%20think.

8. Tinder Year In Dating Report 2023: https://www.tinderpressroom.com/2023-05-22-WELCOME-TO-A-RENAISSANCE-IN-DATING,-DRIVEN-BY-AUTHENTICITY

9. NPR: Oxford's 2023 Word of the Year: https://www.npr.org/2023/12/04/1216950808/rizz-oxford-word-of-the-year-swiftie

10. YPulse Report on Gen Z & Millennials State of Relationships: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-many-gen-z-millennials-have-really-been-situationship-ypulse/

SCORING SECTION 3: BRINGING THE STRATEGY & IDEA TO LIFE

3A. Describe the key elements of your plan that activated your strategy. Outline any components that were active in the effort e.g. all integral communications, promotions, CRM program, customer experience, pricing changes, etc. that were a part of your effort.

Connecting Gen Z and Millennials with Sweethearts meant starting with our most powerful asset- our product.

Sweethearts Situationships Box

We created a limited run Situationships Box, showcasing our blurry hearts to connect our product with the blurriness of our audience's undefined relationships.

This key image was included in all press coverage and owned platforms, driving home the idea in an incredibly simple way

Our Sweethearts Situationships Box Launch Video helped amplify reach and storytelling on Instagram and Tiktok

This playfully stylized video helped connect the dots between our candy and our audience's relationships, all while celebrating the blurriness of both.

All media directed our audience to our Situationship Microsite for a chance to snag their own box.

3B. Outline the key building blocks of the creative executions for your main marketing vehicles e.g., endline, call-to-actions and format choices. If relevant, include any important changes that optimized the creative while the activity was running.

Key building blocks for our campaign each delivered the link between blurry candies and blurry relationships in a simple, celebratory way.

Our campaign line was: A candy as blurry as your relationship.

The campaign tone was playful, modern and clear.

And with a total paid media budget of just $50k, we needed our key visual to be a share-worthy conversation-starter. This drove development of our Situationship Box key visual & social posts

We told the full story in our launch video, which was stylized in unmissable "Sweethearts pink" to maximize breakthrough on the feed.

3C. Outline the rationale behind your communications strategy, experience strategy and channel plan. Explain how the integral elements worked together to drive results. If relevant, explain how you changed your spend across channels as part of your campaign optimization.

OUR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY: "WIN" VALENTINE' S DAY

We had one objective for this campaign– dominate the earned conversation.

With such an audacious goal, we focused our communications strategy on 3 key things:

1. Be First: Winning Valentine's Day meant being the first big Valentine's story to break that season… the first brand outta the gate. What our competition didn't realize is that the Valentine's Day conversation happens far earlier than you'd think.

   We launched Sweetheart Situationships on January 3rd, a full 6 weeks before Valentine's Day and a full 2 weeks before anyone else.

   Launch consisted of our social campaign video, key images, and a Sweethearts Situationship landing page where limited edition boxes were available for purchase.

   This "early bird gets the worm" mentality garnered almost immediate pickup by major press, with People Magazine talking about Sweethearts Situationships hours after launch.

   As result, Sweethearts was the brand to start the conversation instead of another "us too" voice in the crowd.

2. Go Wide, Then Focus: The second part of our strategy focused on finding our PR sweet spot. Instead of pitching a short list of outlets with "exclusivity", we dropped our press release on the news wire first.

   As requests for info and pickups happened, we were able to see hot spots of interest in real time. Women-led outlets and outlets catering to relationship topics and Gen Z audiences rose to the top.

   We then reached out and custom pitched major outlets within those hotspots to build momentum and maximize our coverage.

3. No Sleep Til V Day: Winning Valentine's Day means being active the whole Valentine's Season. Our PR team was always-on, fielding hundreds of email inquiries a day, working with clients to facilitate spur of the moment Zoom interviews, and sending out same-day PR kits to everyone from Delish to

Drew Barrymore.

On social, we kept messaging fresh and going, launching 23 pieces of organic content, 3 pieces of paid, and always-on community management. Capping off our effort was a giveaway in partnership with jewelry brand Ian Charms.

DATA SOURCES: Section 3

None

SCORING SECTION 4: RESULTS

Results Overview

The "Sweethearts Situationships" campaign far exceeded expectations on every single level.

We took misprinted hearts that would have been discarded and turned them into the most talked about, most loved Valentine's Day candy of the year.

The major boost in revenue was pretty great, too.

Business Objective Results

Business Objective # 1

List Result

Total Sweethearts brand revenue grew by 30% during Q1 2024. (1)

Context

Growing total revenue by 30% during Q1 at a time when consumer spending growth on candy was between 9-10% is a testament to the brand's power to breakthrough and create strong demand.

Considering our campaign ran for just 6 weeks, and that Valentine's Day is midway through Q1, the revenue growth over this short time is even more impressive and represents the near immediate impact of our idea.

Marketing Objectives Results

Marketing Objective # 1

List Result

Sweethearts Situationships drove 4 billion earned media impressions between January 3 and February 14, 2024. (3, 5)

Context

We beat our earned media impressions goal by over 36x. All in a period of 6 weeks from campaign start through Valentine's Day.

Activity Objectives Results

Activity Objective # 1

List Result

Positive brand conversation sentiment among Gen Z grew by 640% between Jan 3 and Feb 14, 2024. (5)

Context

Our campaign received 98% positive sentiment when looking at Gen Z conversations on social. For a generation that savvy, we considered this an absolute home run.

Additional Results

none

Marketing rarely works in isolation. Outside of your effort, what else in the marketplace could have affected the results of this case - positive or negative?

No Other Factors

Explain the influence (or lack of influence) of the factors you selected above.

None

DATA SOURCES: Section 4

1. Sweethearts Internal Revenue Tracking: 2020-2024 / Total Revenue

2. National Retail Federation: https://nrf.com/research-insights/holiday-data-and-trends/valentines-day

3. Sweethearts Internal 2023 Valentine's Campaign Performance Report, covering owned channel and paid media performance

4. Sweethearts Qualitative Research: October 2019 / 12 focus groups, 2 cities, Gen Z n-24 Millennials-n-24

5. Social Listening via Meltwater between Jan 3 - Feb 14 2024, pulled Feb 16th 2024. Compared against conversation between Jan 3 - Feb 14 2023, pulled Feb 16th 2024.

INVESTMENT OVERVIEW

Paid Media Expenditure (Current Competition Time Period)

Under $500 thousand

Paid Media Expenditures (Previous Comparable Time Period)

Under $500 thousand

Compared to other competitors in this category, this budget is:

Less

Compared to prior year spend on the brand overall, the brand's overall budget this year is:

About the same

Media Budget Elaboration

Sweetheart Situationships spent $58,999.88 boosting organic content on TikTok and Meta, and publishing paid “dark posts” on Meta and paid video ads on TikTok

Impressions for all **paid** media were 38,374,964 of the campaign's 4,000,000,000 total impressions-- less that 1% of total impressions.

Total media spend the year prior (2023) was $50,202.00, spent entirely in paid Meta ad placements.

Production & Other Non-Media Expenditures

Under $500 Thousand

PRODUCTION & OTHER NON-MEDIA EXPENDITURES ELABORATION

Total product dollars spent on Sweethearts Situationships was $68,250.

This was spent to produce 500 boxes of Sweetheart Situationships, our key image, our launch video, and our campaign landing page.

We shot creative keeping production to a minimum while still producing a high quality video that captured our story and our brand vibe.

Was owned media a part of your effort?

Yes : A website landing page was created to showcase the Sweethearts Situationships product. We also posted on Sweethearts owned organic social channels- Instagram and TikTok

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Sponsorships and Media Partnerships

Not Applicable

Elaboration on Sponsorships and Media Partnerships

None were used

DATA SOURCES: INVESTMENT OVERVIEW

none

All Touchpoints

Digital Mktg. – Short Video (:15-3 min.)
Digital Mktg. – Social: Organic
Digital Mktg. – Social: Paid
Interactive / Website / Apps
Packaging & Product Design
Public Relations

MAIN TOUCHPOINT #1 (Select one of the touchpoints from the chart)

Packaging & Product Design

MAIN TOUCHPOINT #2 (Select one of the touchpoints from the chart or Not Applicable.)

Public Relations

MAIN TOUCHPOINT #3 (Select one of the touchpoints from the chart or Not Applicable.)

Digital Mktg. – Short Video (:15-3 min.)

Social Media Platforms

Instagram
TikTok

COMPANY & INDIVIDUAL CREDITS

Lead Agency(s)

Tombras United States

Agency Network

None

Holding Company

Independent

Client(s)

Spangler Candy Company United States

Client Network

None

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