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CHIHUAHUA IS A TACO GOLIATH 1B

SCRAWNY TV DOG MAKES FAT SPLASH

THURSDAY



By Dan MacMedan for USA TODAY

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COVER STORY

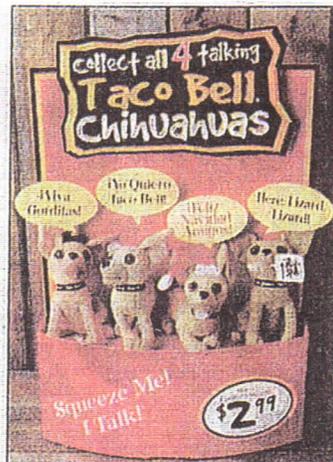
Taco Bell finds a dog's life quite fetching

A Chihuahua leaves a mark on society and takes a bite out of the fast-food competition



By Dan MacMedan for USA TODAY

Pawing ahead: A dog named Gidget boosts Taco Bell.



Hot commodities: By the millions, toys will arrive next month.

hero to teen-age boys who worship the ground he prances on. He's reviled by some Hispanics, who object to being symbolized by a bilingual canine. He has a date in court over who created his multimillion-dollar image. He's caused a nationwide run on Chihuahuas.

Oh, and he's a she.

On camera, the Chihuahua is portrayed as a canine with the mind-set of a pimply-faced, 18-year-old dude whose sex drive is only exceeded by his drive for Taco Bell food. Off camera, the crowd-shy Chihuahua, whose name is Gidget, spends about 80% of her day snoozing in her owner's Valencia, Calif., home. She was purchased for \$300 but makes

By Bruce Horovitz
USA TODAY

This dog has legs. Taco Bell's chattering Chihuahua just filmed his 17th TV commercial. But can this scrawny spokesdog walk the walk of the Energizer Bunny, hop the hop of Budweiser's beer-croaking frogs or strut the strut of Morris the Cat?

Don't bet your taco money on it. Yet.

For the moment, however, Taco Bell's 8-pound Chihuahua-with-an-attitude is the 900-pound gorilla of Madison Avenue. He's a folk

up to \$20,000 per commercial shoot, celebrity brokers estimate. To Taco Bell, she's priceless: She moves tacos.

After several years of slumping, Taco Bell's sales have headed up since the Spanish-speaking dog uttered the now-famous phrase "Yo quiero Taco Bell." ("I want some Taco Bell.") Three years ago, same-store sales at Taco Bell were down nearly 4%. This year, while much of the industry is flat, they are up nearly 3%. Gidget's getting much of the credit. Taco Bell will spend about \$200 million promoting its chipper Chihuahua the next year.

"That dog is critical to our success," says Peter Waller, president of Taco Bell. "It happens maybe once in a lifetime that you get a nation talking about you."

How has such a tiny critter managed to cause such a big stir on and off Madison Avenue? Pure animal magnetism. Boys ages 12 to 18 prefer Taco Bell's ads above all others, says teen marketing consultant Irma Zandl.

For the first time, consumer awareness of Taco Bell ads rivals awareness of McDonald's spots, researcher Bob Sandelman says.

And the campaign ranks among the three most popular ads ever rated for Ad Track, USA TODAY's consumer poll measuring ad effectiveness.

Experts who track teen culture say this dog is wagging the tail of trendiness. On the subway or the soccer field, teens are quick to chant his one-liners in Spanish and English.

"He's Woody Allen meets Puff Daddy," teen marketing guru Marian Salzman says. "This dog is becoming as big a part of pop culture as the Energizer Bunny."

One ad agency is behind the bunny's and the dog's campaigns: TBWA Chiat/Day. But like the bunny spots, in their 10th year, can this dog keep going and going and going?

Not everyone thinks so. "He's going to be dog meat," says ad legend-turned-satirist Stan Freberg, dubbed by *Advertising Age* as the father of the funny commercial.

"I'm bored with him already; aren't you?" says Freberg, who nearly three decades ago penned this slogan for Sun-sweet Prunes: "Today the pits, tomorrow the wrinkles."

Even in Athens, Greece, where former Taco Bell chairman John Martin just returned from a business trip, T-shirts with the Taco Bell dog are hawked widely at flea markets.

Still, Martin isn't convinced this ad campaign featuring the cat-size dog with pointy ears has nine lives. "It's very endearing," says Martin, widely credited for taking Taco Bell from the No. 19 fast-food chain to No. 4, "but it doesn't really talk about the quality of the food."

Maybe so. But it certainly has consumers talking. More than a year after the dog first appeared in a TV spot, passing up a female Chihuahua in favor of some Taco Bell food, Taco Bell receives hundreds of letters and e-mail messages weekly about its spokesdog.

Bigger than Shaq

Youngsters write to request the dog's autograph. Chihuahua owners, dreaming of stardom for their pets, send photos and videos. And Taco Bell has received serious inquiries from dog owners asking how it taught a Chihuahua to talk.

"We've spent a lot of money on celebrities like Shaquille O'Neal and Hakeem Olajuwon," Waller says. "This dog has done better."

Gidget also is the talk of the Internet. A very unofficial Web site for the dog, started by 20-year-old David Long, receives several thousand hits daily. The site is filled with wild gossip about the dog, including utterly false rumors that she was killed by a runaway camera dolly while filming a TV spot.

Most people who visit the site want to hawk or buy merchandise — beyond widely available T-shirts — bearing the dog's familiar mug, Long says. The most popular items are a limited number of 6-inch, plush, talking Chihuahuas test-marketed in Omaha.

Consumers in Omaha bought them at Taco Bell for \$2.99. But they're being sold over the Internet for as much as \$100.

Not for long, though. Just in time for the holidays, Taco Bell says it will unleash the dog from her promotional cage. In mid-November, millions of the plush Chihuahuas will be sold at Taco Bells coast to coast. Limit: one case per customer.

"This is a means to an end," says Marty Brochstein, executive editor of *Licensing Letter*. "It sells more food."

Bones of contention

So who created this dog of the decade? That depends on whom you ask.

TBWA Chiat/Day ad executives Chuck Bennett and Clay Williams claim they concocted the campaign. They say the inspiration came to them when they were sitting outside the Tortilla Grill, a tiny Mexican restaurant in Venice, Calif. "We saw a little Chihuahua run by that appeared to be on a mission," Bennett says. "We both looked at each other and said: 'That would be funny.'"

But Joseph Shields and Thomas Rinks aren't laughing. They say that in 1995 their promotional firm, Wrench LLC, created a cartoon character dubbed Psycho Chihuahua, which appeared on T-shirts and merchandise. They met with Taco Bell representatives at a licensing trade show in 1996, then sent drawings and products to Taco Bell. But Taco Bell changed ad agencies, and the concept was dropped.

One year later, Taco Bell's Chihuahua campaign began. Shields and Rinks are suing Taco Bell for unspecified damages. "They asked us for an ad campaign," says lawyer Doug Dozeman, who represents the two men. "We developed it. But they used it without bothering to pay us for it."

Executives from Taco Bell insist they didn't steal the idea. "That's just not true," Waller says. He declined to comment further on the lawsuit. A trial is scheduled for June.

Gidget has faced another trial of sorts: controversy.

Some Hispanic leaders have been outspoken in their criticism. "When people laugh at the dog, they're laughing at all Hispanics," says Mario Obledo, president of the National Coalition of Hispanic Organizations.

"Taco Bell has made millions off of ethnic foods," says Gabriel Cazares, ex-mayor of Clearwater, Fla. "They owe a lot more to the Hispanic community than to portray us as dogs."

"That's a lot of malarkey," says Vada Hill, chief marketing officer at Taco Bell. He says internal polling shows that the ad is more popular among Hispanics than Anglos.

Even Chihuahua breeders have mixed feelings about the campaign. The ads are so cute that they've caused a run on Chihuahuas, says Sandra Whittle, president of the Chihuahua Club of America. The problem, she says, is that unhappy owners who discover their dogs aren't at all like the one in the commercial are dumping them in record numbers, resulting in a doubling or tripling of rescue calls the group makes monthly.

Barking for a living

But Carlos Alazraqui says he owes his career to Gidget. He, after all, is the dog's voice.

"Ninety percent of my income is from that dog," says the 36-year-old Alazraqui, who recently moved from a studio apartment he was renting in Burbank, Calif., to a four-bedroom house he purchased in the San Fernando Valley.

He won't reveal what he earns for his voiceovers for Gidget, but celebrity brokers estimate it's up to \$100,000 annually. "It's very surreal," Alazraqui says. "We can't exist without each other."

As for Gidget's trainer, Sue Chipperton, well, life has changed drastically. She's trained other Hollywood dogs, but none with the marketing wallop of Gidget.

Before Gidget's fame, Chipperton occasionally drove to the mall and left Gidget in the car for a few minutes. No more. The last — and final — time she did that, people were lined up at her car window when she came out of the store.

Gidget, who likes to sleep on a special blanket at the end of Chipperton's bed, receives odd gifts from fans. Most recently, she received a doggie car seat from a woman in North Carolina. Others have hand-crafted plush pillows for her.

"It's not the dog that has changed," Chipperton says. "It's the people around us."