
INSPIRED MARKETERS

How Holiday Inn Express[®] Stayed Smart



LinkedIn 

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Staying Smart for 25 Years	3
The Digital Opportunity.	5
Riggle Continues the Comedic DNA	8
The Stack Station Breaks Through	11
LinkedIn and BuzzFeed Drive Engagement	12
The Measure of Success	15

• STORY BY SEAN CALLAHAN •
• PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL MILLER & TIM DOLEN •

STAYING SMART FOR 25 YEARS

When it launched 25 years ago, InterContinental Hotels Group's (IHG) Holiday Inn Express® brand essentially created a new lodging category: the limited-service hotel. Travelers loved the concept, and the number of Holiday Inn Express® properties grew from just three in 1991 to more than 2,400 by 2015.

The iconic *Stay Smart*® advertising campaign contributed to this growth - and to the popularity and accommodating feel of the brand. "It was a fantastic idea that changed people's perception of staying at a less expensive hotel to be a smart decision," said Jason Aspes, Executive Creative Director at Ogilvy & Mather, Atlanta.

A prime example of the *Stay Smart* TV spots, which began running in 1998, featured Carl, "a bouncer from Saskatchewan," who hadn't finished the seventh grade but was still winning big on "Jeopardy!" He explained his





newfound intelligence to Alex Trebek with the famous line that had defined the commercials. No, he hadn't started high school, "But I did stay in a Holiday Inn Express last night," Carl said.

"Over the years, the campaign has done such a nice job of helping us to weave our brand into culture in a very relevant way," said Seth Freeman, Brand Marketing Director for Holiday Inn Express®.

"The *Stay Smart* campaign has been a long running success," Brian Smith, Vice President of Social at Ogilvy Public Relations. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. But you have to find new and different ways to apply it in the modern marketplace."

Here's the story of how the Holiday Inn Express brand adapted its *Stay Smart* campaign to the modern world of digital, social, and mobile.

• PICTURED FROM LEFT TO RIGHT •
KATY COSTNER, STACY ARMISTEAD, JASON ASPES,
CIGDEM TOPALLI, SETH FREEMAN, AND BRIAN SMITH
NOT PICTURED: JAMES SIMON, GLENYS FERNANDEZ

THE DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY

In the past 25 years, of course, TV viewing habits have changed radically, as exemplified by the behavior of Millennials, a key target audience for the Holiday Inn Express brand. Millennials lead the way in cord cutting and using DVRs to skip ads. So the brand had to explore new ways to reach that target audience.

Working with its agency team, which includes Mindshare and Ogilvy & Mather, the Holiday Inn Express brand took a long look at a segment of its target audience: Millennial business travelers. "Our approach is fun and lighthearted but always laser focused on communicating what matters most to our guests," Freeman said.

The agency team also believed in this approach. "We need to look, first and foremost, from the audience point of view, and that's really what unifies the team across the brand: understanding who we are going after, what are their pain points, what are their wins," Smith said.



A man wearing a blue pinstriped suit jacket over a blue patterned button-down shirt. His hands are clasped in front of him. He is wearing a watch on his left wrist and a ring on his left hand. A pocket square is visible in his jacket pocket.

"Our approach is fun and lighthearted but always laser focused on communicating what matters most to our guests."



SETH FREEMAN



The key finding about Millennials was where to reach them. "They consume a voracious amount of content throughout the day," said James Simon, Director of Strategic Planning at Mindshare. "They are socially forward, and we knew that they were heavy mobile users."

To reach its audience, the Holiday Inn Express brand turned to digital, social and mobile. "It's a digitally led campaign," Freeman said. "We're definitely trying to reach our target via social channels."

RIGGLE CONTINUES THE COMEDIC DNA

The Holiday Inn Express brand concluded it needed a deeper level of engagement. To achieve this goal, the Holiday Inn Express brand and its agencies used a three-part strategy, which all team members have committed to memory. "Overall," said Stacy Armistead, Senior Search and Social Manager at Mindshare, "our goals are to break through the clutter, differentiate our offering, and persuade to action." In short, the Holiday Inn Express brand wants advertising that gets noticed, that offers a compelling reason to stay at Holiday Inn Express hotels, and ultimately convinces consumers to choose the hotel when heading out on the road.

To break through, the Holiday Inn Express brand and its agencies turned to comedy, which had characterized the *Stay Smart* campaign from the beginning. "I think that's in our DNA: the comedic approach," Aspes said.





Online videos ft. Rob Riggle helped drive Holiday Inn Express brand's success on LinkedIn. Click [here](#) to view the video.

But instead of creating 30-second spots for TV, the Holiday Inn Express brand built online videos around actor and comedian Rob Riggle, who was a "Daily Show" correspondent and appeared in such films as "21 Jump Street" and "Talladega Nights."

"In marketing, there's a little bit of magic that has to happen, and that's what happened when we found Riggle," Smith said. "You couldn't have asked for a better spokesperson in terms of authenticity."

With Riggle on camera and Ogilvy creating concepts, the Holiday Inn Express brand's digital material drew an audience. "I've heard some experts say create content that is so entertaining or so useful that people would actually pay for it, pay for the advertising," Smith said. "We have to create campaigns and content that people actually want to spend time with."

It's clear people wanted to spend time with the creative featuring Riggle. For example, an online video starring Riggle and titled, "[Holiday Inn Express: Mindreader](#)," has tallied more than 1.2 million views on YouTube.

A man in a dark suit jacket and a blue and white checkered shirt is adjusting his jacket. He is wearing a watch on his left wrist and a ring on his left hand. The background is dark and out of focus.

"We have to create campaigns and content that people actually want to spend time with."



BRIAN SMITH

THE STACK STATION BREAKS THROUGH

But Riggle did more than attract eyeballs. He – with the aid of the one-touch pancake machine – helped the Holiday Inn Express brand stand out and differentiate itself from the competition. In the brand’s category, free breakfast is a necessity for attracting guests. “We knew that breakfast was one of the most important drivers for decision making within this category, so people want to know that there’s going to be a great free breakfast option,” Freeman said.

By monitoring social media, the Holiday Inn Express team found that one thing in particular about its breakfast had captivated guests. “We found our guests were posting comments and videos via social media about how amazing our one-touch pancake machine is,” Freeman said. “They were doing this on their own without us prompting them, which was really cool to see.”

So the Holiday Inn Express brand went all in on the pancake machine. “It was kind of a lightning rod that people were talking about, and in this category it’s hard to find those



unique (or differentiating) amenities that stand out, so we embraced it and we ran with it,” Aspes said.

The Holiday Inn Express brand created a contest – launched with a video featuring Riggle, of course – to encourage potential guests to submit names for the pancake machine. The name “Stack Station” won the contest, which ultimately generated more than 28,000 entries. “We almost doubled what we anticipated in terms of the levels of engagements in this contest,” Freeman said.

LINKEDIN AND BUZZFEED DRIVE ENGAGEMENT

LinkedIn and BuzzFeed are among the key channels driving engagement. The Holiday Inn Express brand likes LinkedIn, because it has the business traveler audience. “A big part of our target audience is definitely the business traveler, and LinkedIn is a perfect place to reach them,” Freeman said.

LinkedIn also enabled the Holiday Inn Express brand to promote Riggle videos in display ads and via LinkedIn Sponsored Updates, the platform’s native advertising offering. The comedic video element stood out among the buttoned-down business ads on LinkedIn. “It was really about finding how the brand could show up on LinkedIn and disrupt a little bit,” Smith said. “It worked well, because it’s unexpected.”

“The engagement has been really high on Sponsored Updates,” said Katy Costner, Global Social Marketing Manager, IHG. The Holiday Inn Express brand’s Sponsored Updates outperformed the engagement rate benchmark





by 45 percent. The Sponsored Updates also beat the click-through rate benchmark by 40 percent.

The top performing Sponsored Update for the Holiday Inn Express brand promoted a BuzzFeed article, "14 Pancakes That Prove They're Not Just for Breakfast Anymore." That Sponsored Update generated an engagement rate 75 percent higher than the benchmark.

"It's exceeded expectations," Freeman said. "Our partnership with LinkedIn continues to evolve and we're very pleased with what we've been able to accomplish."



75%

The Holiday Inn Express brand's Sponsored Updates generated engagement rates that outperformed benchmarks by 75%

THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

The Holiday Inn Express brand's overall goals were clear: Break through the clutter, differentiate the brand, persuade people to stay at the company's hotels. "Sentiment measures are so important because they reflect how consumers are engaging with our content, and also provide an indication of how impactful our message is at getting consumers to consider staying with us in the future," Freeman said.

The Holiday Inn Express brand's online awareness increased 8 percentage points and its consideration intent was up 5 percentage points. Additionally, the Holiday Inn Express brand saw its placement in the top three preferences increase by 4 percentage points.





With such positive performance, the brand plans to continue pursuing engagement with its potential customers via digital, social, and mobile channels. “We think of the funnel as a continuous conversation,” Freeman said. “We don’t intend to have just a one-way dialogue, and that’s why the evolution of this campaign was really steeped in engagement platforms.”



And LinkedIn will continue to be a key driver of engagement for the Holiday Inn Express brand. “We love LinkedIn and the partnership we have, and we’re looking forward to doing more,” Freeman said.



Inspired Marketers: Holiday Inn Express

