

How Applebee's Scored Big with its NFL Kick-Off Campaign

Applebee's delivered a touchdown performance in its second NFL season as the league's official Grill + Bar sponsor. The brand's star-studded campaign resonated powerfully with fans and drove exceptional purchase intent across key demographics.

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Campaign Performance Highlights

69%

Purchase Intent

Top 2 Box intent driven by the "Fans" creative, 6 points above restaurant norms

\$14.99

Value Deal

Ultimate Trio appetizer offer that resonated with viewers

3

Star Athletes

Featured in campaign creative

Applebee's campaign demonstrated remarkable effectiveness by combining celebrity star power with compelling value propositions. The strategic approach resulted in measurable business outcomes that exceeded industry benchmarks, proving that authentic connections with sports fans translate directly to purchase consideration and restaurant visits.

Strategy #1: Leveraging Star Power for Maximum Persuasion

The campaign strategically featured three powerhouse personalities who authentically connect with NFL audiences: Detroit Lions head coach Dan Campbell, Houston Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud, and Las Vegas Raiders running back Ashton Jeanty. Each brought their unique appeal and fanbase to amplify Applebee's message.

The standout :15 "Fans" creative showcased C.J. Stroud alongside a memorable Dan Campbell cameo, delivering persuasive messaging that resonated deeply with viewers. This strategic celebrity selection wasn't just about recognition—it was about choosing personalities who embody the enthusiasm and authenticity that define game day experiences.

The results speak volumes: the spot drove an impressive Top 2 Box purchase intent of 69%, surpassing one-year restaurant norms by 6 percentage points. This above-norm performance demonstrates how the right celebrity partnerships can transform advertising effectiveness and drive real business results.



Strategy #2: Highlighting Value-Driven Deals That Deliver

\$14.99 Ultimate Trio

The hero offer that anchored the campaign, providing three shareable appetizers at an accessible price point that appeals to groups gathering for game day

Two for \$25 Promotion

Viewer verbatims confirmed strong value perception, with audiences explicitly mentioning this deal as a compelling reason to visit

Visual Appeal

Across the general population audience, the creative conveyed "Yummy" and "Authentic" visuals that whetted appetites and drove consideration

In today's value-conscious environment, Applebee's demonstrated that price-driven promotions can drive traffic without sacrificing brand perception. The campaign successfully balanced aspirational celebrity endorsements with accessible pricing, creating a powerful combination that motivated immediate action. By featuring mouth-watering food visuals alongside clear pricing, the spots removed barriers to trial and gave viewers a concrete reason to choose Applebee's for their next game day gathering.

Strategy #3: Capitalizing on Comedic Talent



Dan Campbell: The Unexpected Comedy Star

Coach Dan Campbell's natural comedic talent became a viral sensation, helping Applebee's spots trend organically across social media platforms. His authentic personality and timing made the creative feel genuine rather than scripted, resonating with audiences who appreciate real moments over polished performances.

This engaging element contributed significantly to the campaign's overall appeal and memorability. The decision to bring Campbell back for a second season was made easy by audience response—when talent performs this well, the strategic choice becomes obvious. His presence transformed functional food advertising into entertainment that viewers actively wanted to share and discuss.

The social media momentum generated additional earned media value, extending the campaign's reach far beyond paid placements and creating conversation around the Applebee's brand during the crucial NFL season launch period.

Strategy #4: Connecting with the Game Day Experience

The campaign was meticulously designed to position Applebee's as an integral part of the game day ritual. Rather than simply advertising food and drinks, the creative captured the emotional experience of gathering with friends and family to celebrate football season. This strategic approach tapped into the deeper motivations that drive restaurant visits during NFL season—the desire for community, excitement, and shared experiences.

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"The creative successfully captured the fun side of eating out and the excitement of football season and gathering around an event."

– **NFL Fan Feedback**

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“

"It makes me want to grab my friends and head to Applebee's for the next big game. The atmosphere they show is exactly what we're looking for."

– **Campaign Viewer**

”

Comments from NFL fans confirmed that the campaign successfully connected on this emotional level. Viewers didn't just see appetizers and promotions—they saw themselves in the spots, imagining their own game day celebrations at Applebee's. This authentic connection transformed the brand from a dining option into a destination that enhances the entire football-watching experience.

Strategy #5: Strategic Media Planning for Optimized Outcomes

01

Performance Analysis

Continuous monitoring revealed that the "Fans" creative featuring C.J. Stroud and Dan Campbell significantly outperformed other campaign spots, even within broad audience segments

02

Strategic Reallocation

Based on the stronger purchase intent data, the recommendation was made to shift forward media spend toward this highest-performing creative

03

Optimized Investment

By aligning media dollars with proven performance, Applebee's could maximize return on advertising spend and drive superior business outcomes

04

Accountability Framework

This data-driven approach ensures every advertising dollar is accountable and working toward measurable objectives

This strategic flexibility demonstrates sophisticated marketing maturity. Rather than committing to an equal media split across all creative executions, Applebee's recognized that performance data should drive investment decisions. The ability to pivot quickly based on real consumer response separates exceptional campaigns from average ones. By following the data and doubling down on what works, brands can master media fragmentation and ensure maximum efficiency in an increasingly complex advertising landscape.

Key Insights for Restaurant Marketers

Celebrity Selection Matters

Choose personalities who authentically connect with your target audience and embody your brand values. The right celebrity partnership can drive purchase intent significantly above industry norms, while the wrong choice wastes budget and dilutes messaging.

Value + Quality = Winning Combination

Price-driven promotions work exceptionally well when combined with appetizing visuals and aspirational brand positioning. Don't sacrifice quality perception for value—showcase both simultaneously to drive traffic and protect margins.

Organic Virality Amplifies Reach

When creative naturally trends on social media, it generates exponential earned media value beyond paid placements. Design campaigns with shareability in mind, featuring moments that viewers want to discuss and distribute.

Emotional Connection Drives Action

Connect with the experience and emotions surrounding dining occasions, not just the food itself. Positioning your restaurant as part of meaningful moments creates stronger brand loyalty than functional benefits alone.

Agile Optimization Maximizes ROI

Monitor creative performance continuously and reallocate spend toward top performers. Data-driven flexibility allows you to maximize efficiency and ensure accountability for every advertising dollar invested.

Mastering Fragmentation Through Strategic Integration

The Accountability Imperative

In today's fragmented media landscape, brands face unprecedented challenges in reaching and engaging target audiences. Consumers interact with content across dozens of platforms, making it increasingly difficult to break through the noise and drive meaningful business outcomes. Applebee's campaign demonstrates that success requires more than creative excellence—it demands a comprehensive strategy that integrates celebrity partnerships, compelling offers, emotional storytelling, and data-driven optimization.

The brand's approach showcases how restaurant marketers can master fragmentation by ensuring accountability for every advertising dollar. Rather than spreading budget evenly across all tactics, winning brands follow the performance data and invest where results are strongest. This disciplined approach transforms advertising from a cost center into a measurable growth driver.

Actionable Framework

The Applebee's case study provides a replicable framework that restaurant marketers can adapt to their own brands:

- Identify celebrity partners who authentically connect with your target demographic
- Develop value propositions that balance price and quality perception
- Create emotionally resonant creative that positions your brand within meaningful dining occasions
- Monitor performance rigorously across all creative executions
- Reallocate spend dynamically toward highest-performing assets
- Measure impact through concrete business metrics like purchase intent and traffic

By following this strategic approach, brands can connect effectively with audiences, drive measurable results, and ensure every marketing investment delivers measurable return.

Ready to Score Your Own Marketing Win?



Identify Your Audience

Understand who you're trying to reach and what motivates their dining decisions



Develop Your Strategy

Integrate celebrity partnerships, value offers, and emotional storytelling into a cohesive campaign



Measure & Optimize

Track performance rigorously and reallocate investment toward what works best

Applebee's NFL kick-off campaign proves that combining the right elements—celebrity endorsements, compelling value propositions, authentic emotional connections, and data-driven optimization—creates marketing that drives real business results. The 69% Top 2 Box purchase intent, significantly above restaurant norms, demonstrates that strategic campaigns deliver measurable ROI.

For brand managers and marketing strategists at quick-service and casual dining restaurants, this case study offers a proven roadmap. By understanding how different creative executions perform with your target audiences and strategically allocating media spend to maximize impact, you can master today's fragmented media landscape and ensure accountability for every advertising dollar. The opportunity is clear: connect authentically with consumers during the moments that matter most, and watch your brand become an essential part of their dining experiences.

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