

For Pizza Hut, a New Pie-in-the-Sky Ad Strategy

*After Shooting for the Moon,
Restaurant Operator Opts
For a Billboard Blastoff*

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A new advertising space race is about to ignite.

Pizza Hut is expected to announce today that it has bought the rights to slap a 30-foot-high version of the company's newly redesigned logo on an unmanned Russian Proton rocket. The rocket is set to launch the International Space Station's living quarters in mid-November.

The mammoth billboard will be the centerpiece of a major space campaign by the company, including TV spots featuring the blastoff and a galaxy of in-store promotions. Pizza Hut also hopes to send up pizzas on the Space Shuttle for those assembling the orbiting platform.

The Proton section bearing Pizza Hut's symbol will burn up in the atmosphere. But the prospect of a few seconds of global exposure enralls Pizza Hut executives. "We needed a mythic symbol," says Mike Rawlings, Pizza Hut's chief concept officer (translation: chief executive), who has led a massive overhaul of the world's biggest pizza chain in recent months.

Mr. Rawlings won't say how much the logo launch is costing Dallas-based Pizza Hut. A spokesman for the chain's parent, Tricon Global Restaurants Inc., says the price will be about half that of a 30-second spot on the upcoming Super Bowl, which now runs between \$1.9 million and \$2.5 million.

The notion of painting its new logo on a spaceship came to Pizza Hut after its marketing gurus' first idea flamed out. Initially, they wanted to project the chain's updated logo onto the moon. For a while, those in the know hummed, "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie" as they called on physicists, astronomers and others to see if it was doable.

A team led by Jonathan Blum, a Tricon senior vice president, spent weeks learning "how to make this happen." They called on representatives at the Naval Observatory in Washington, satellite experts at Hughes Space and Communications International, the Federal Aviation Administration and scientists at the Hayden Planetarium in New York, among others.

The idea, they soon learned, wouldn't work. First, the necessary laser technology won't be available for years, satellite builders said. Even if it were, the logo would have to be as big as Texas to be seen by earthlings without telescopes. Aviation experts had another compelling reason to nix the notion: The light beam might blind pilots and interfere with planes' navigation instruments.

The pizza chain then contacted two firms that have worked with the Russian space program before, Space Marketing Inc., of Roswell, Ga., and **Entertainment Marketing Communications International Ltd.**, Stamford, Conn. Executives there suggested the rocket logo.

Until now, space marketing has been limited in frequency and success. Three years ago, PepsiCo Inc. paid \$5 million to have cosmonauts float a four-foot aluminum-and-nylon replica of a Pepsi can outside the Mir orbital station for a TV commercial. Mir also flogged Omega watches and milk for an Israeli dairy.

A Hollywood studio once had the Russians paint a giant likeness of Arnold Schwarzenegger on a rocket, although the stunt misfired when the launch was delayed until well after the film opened. And in 1990, a Japanese television reporter rode a Soyuz rocket bearing logos of toothpaste and diaper makers.

But when Space Marketing suggested floating mile-long inflatable signs in low orbit over Atlanta's Olympic Games, some in Congress quickly drafted legislation to prevent it.

Although the financially starved Russian space agency will pocket Pizza Hut's launch fee, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is already exploring commercialization possibilities to help it make up for anticipated budgetary shortfalls. U.S. law prevents advertisers from putting symbols on astronauts' spacesuits, but would-be sponsors are lining up to talk with NASA about other tie-ins.

Just last week NASA, administrator Daniel Goldin said his agency might be willing to eventually turn over operation of the space station to private enterprise, with the government becoming a tenant.

. Pizza Hut has dealt with the Russians before. In 1997 it featured former Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and his granddaughter, Anastasia, in a commercial. But the chain operates only three restaurants in Russia now, having closed two in Moscow earlier this year after the ruble's precipitous decline.

The introduction of a new logo caps two years of makeover at Pizza Hut. It ranged from recalibrating pizza-oven temperatures to replacing what Tricon's Mr. Blum calls the "kibbles and bits" on pies with fresher toppings. The company closed or sold to franchisees hundreds of poorly performing restaurants and cooked up a new exterior design to update the tired red-roof look.

While sending their symbol heavenward has captivated Pizza Hut executives, they're also mindful of the risks-the, Proton has about a 95% successful launch rate. So they've insured their investment in the space shot.

Mr. Rawlings, the chain's CEO, is sanguine. "Anything can go wrong, but if I attack life that way, we wouldn't get very far," he says.



A Russian rocket, shown in an artist's rendering, is set to blast off with *Pizza Hut's* new logo