

Rick and Morty's Excellent Adventure

To build excitement for the new season of "Rick and Morty," Adult Swim uses a national road show — and a profound knowledge of its Millennial audience — to generate 50 million social-media impressions and sell \$2 million worth of merchandise. *By Charles Pappas*

Marketing to Millennials can be as lucrative as finding the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow — and just as difficult. For every Netflix Inc. that skillfully uses social media to attract and engage the 70-million-strong demographic born between 1981 and 1996, there's an International House of Pancakes clunkily adopting the slang "on fleek" to sell flapjacks. Even tougher is marketing to a Millennial audience that also perceives itself as intellectually more astute and informed than the average channel-surfing Joe. That's the marketing minefield Adult Swim entered when it launched an event aimed at building anticipation for the upcoming third season of its runaway hit show, "Rick and Morty."

Part of the Cartoon Network (which is itself part of Warner Media LLC's Turner Broadcasting System Inc.), Adult Swim was worried the series' 18-month-long hiatus threatened to dilute viewer interest.



But any promotional initiative had to be executed carefully, so as not to alienate the show's rabid Millennial fan base known for rejecting traditional advertising and marketing messages. Complicating matters was another unique attraction of "Rick and Morty" that made it a difficult target for promotion: its relentless and often subtle references, from the literary

(H.P. Lovecraft's horror stories and George Orwell's "Animal Farm") to the pop cultural (Freddy Kruger and the Lucky Charms leprechaun mascot), that many

viewers believed required a keen — even superior — intellect to catch.

In fact, the phrase "To be fair, you have to have a very high IQ to understand 'Rick and Morty,'" which started on social news aggregator/discussion forum Reddit as a kidding-not-kidding statement about the

mental requirements of being a fan of the series, fetches about 500,000 search results on Google. "We needed to deliver messages to this core Millennial audience that were authentic and true to the tone and style of the show," says Leigh Long, head of marketing for Atlanta-based The XD Agency LLC, which Adult Swim charged with designing the promotional campaign.

Marketing to Millennials

The devil is always in the details, and here the fiend would be found in the show's demographic and one-in-a-million tone and style. Starring Rick, an alcoholic and nihilistic mad scientist notorious for boozy burping, and Morty, his neurotic grandson notable for never knowing the touch of a woman or a high SAT score, the show flings the duo across multiple timelines and through portals to numberless parallel universes. The series quickly became the most popular TV comedy among Millennials. Per Nielsen Inc., it leaves even hit shows such as "The Big Bang Theory" in its animated dust, averaging almost 40 percent more viewers in that 22-to-37 age bracket than the venerable CBS staple. Indeed, "Rick and Morty" and its fans wield a cultural cachet so powerful that Rick's mere mention of his unbridled lust for McDonald's

MULTIVENUE EVENT

Company: Turner Broadcasting System Inc., a Warner Media LLC company (Adult Swim)

Event: Don't Even Trip Road Trip

Objectives: Increase awareness of the upcoming "Rick and Morty" season. Attract 300 to 400 fans per stop. Generate several thousand social-media posts, engagements, and impressions. Sell \$100,000 worth of branded show merchandise.

Strategy: Craft a nationwide road show that appears in the 25 top viewing markets for "Rick and Morty." Offer events of limited duration whose appearances and activities will be spread by fans over social media.

Tactic: Draw attention via social media and word of mouth with a promotional vehicle employing a giant version of the cartoon's Rick Sanchez character.

Results: Drew an average of 1,200 attendees per tour stop. Sparked 50 million online impressions on Twitter and Instagram. Sold \$2 million in merchandise.

Creative/Production Agency: The XD Agency LLC, www.xdagency.com

Budget: \$750,000 – \$999,000

Szechuan nugget sauce, a short-lived promotional flavor offered in tandem with the 1998 movie "Mulan," compelled the fast-food giant to bring it back, creating near-riots when several stores stocked inadequate supplies of the ginger-garlic-citrus condiment.

Combined, the difficulty of marketing to a Millennial demographic and a unique audience that views itself as singular made crafting an event for the show's viewers a delicate balancing act. Thus, an effective strategy would have to hit certain notes that resonated with the "Rick and Morty" fan base. First, Adult Swim decided that the promotion would have to be a live, collective experience, because that would keenly play off Millennials' defining passion for such events. "Millennials attend live events at twice the rate of other generations, which makes this an especially effective approach to reach them," says Rachel



The main vehicle for Adult Swim's "Don't Even Trip Road Trip," which promoted its hit show "Rick and Morty," featured a 5,000-pound effigy of one of the titular characters.



To make sure they got first dibs on show-themed merchandise, die-hard “Rick and Morty” fans sometimes arrived at a tour stop up to 18 hours before it opened.

Steinhardt, a consumer-insights analyst with the research firm Gartner Inc. in Stamford, CT.

Second, the promotion should be of necessarily short duration, because that very transience would likely make the event all the more valuable to attendees, knowing that the experience, once completed, couldn't be repeated. Once it was gone, it was gone — and that impermanence might just make it worth its weight in marketing gold for this audience. “The Millennial demographic responds well to temporary events like pop-up restaurants,” says Scott Steinberg, CEO of marketing research firm TechSavvy Global, “because those are by definition ephemeral, and participants can gain status by then sharing that one-time-only experience with friends — who may have been unable to take part — over social media.”

Wanting an activation that would reach “Rick and Morty” fans across the county, Adult Swim didn't even

debate the format of the event. Given that the first two legs of its strategy included being live and ephemeral, Adult Swim's marketing team strongly believed that the kind of event that best represented those qualities would be a mobile-marketing campaign. Such a motorized promotion not only was more likely to appeal to Millennials, but also would allow Adult Swim to hold live pop-up events in multiple cities. With the promotion's general concept hammered out, it was formally named after one of the series's lead character's stock catchphrases: the “Don't Even Trip Road Trip.”

Road Runner

While the cartoon undeniably possesses all the snarky and surreal humor of the current zeitgeist, when it came to the road show's transportation, Adult Swim veered to another era. It found its inspiration in the golden age of eccentric promotional vehicles, when oversized rigs such as the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, with

its sausage-and-bun profile, and the 80-year-old, neon-flamed Zippo Car crisscrossed the country marketing their respective brands. So instead of a commonplace 53-foot-long tractor-trailer, Adult Swim opted for something a little more inherently memorable — and photographable: a Ford Transit Connect van mounted with an effigy of Rick in all his irritable, intoxicated glory. Made of carved foam set on a steel frame and topped with Fiberglas, lacquer, and paint, the massive mock-up of a snarling Rick weighed about 5,000 pounds, almost as much as the van itself. Dubbing it the “Rickmobile,” Adult Swim made sure to include the blotch of 150-proof drool that constantly covers the liquidly exuberant character's chin like a boozy beauty mark.

Adult Swim next drilled down on what the actual experience would be for attendees, besides the obvious photo op with the jumbo-sized Rick. Early on, it played with the idea of offering show-based merchandise and Rick-themed food from the truck. Given the phenomenon of fans posting YouTube videos of themselves trying to replicate the show's many made-up foods, such as Eyehole Cereal and Yummy Yums, it was a perceptive initial notion. But after some internal deliberation, Adult Swim determined the logistics of delivering such edibles would be difficult to execute.

What would work, it concluded, was something that at first glance seems counterintuitive to fostering goodwill among a demographic notorious for being wary of marketers: The experiential centerpiece, the very heart of the Don't Even Trip Road Trip, would be a pop-up retail shop. Installed in the Rickmobile, it would sell an assortment of more than 60 show-branded items, from T-shirts and spaceships to portal guns and

pool towels. The notion was actually proof of a deep, if paradoxical, insight into “Rick and Morty” viewers. “Buying a product allows fans to signal their passion for a show,” says TechSavvy Global’s Steinberg, “much the way that devotees of ‘Star Wars’ might show their zeal among their peers by purchasing a Han Solo action figure or a Lego Darth Vader ‘minifigure.’” Even better, that individual purchase typically translates into crowdsourced mass promotion, too. “Millennials are more likely than other generations to want to share their special purchase — in this case ‘Rick and Morty’ memorabilia — on social media,” says Gartner’s Steinhardt.

Next, Adult Swim scheduled the tour for 53 stops in 32 cities, strategically hitting the top 25 areas of “Rick and Morty” viewers, such as San Diego, Philadelphia, and Austin, TX. The specific stopovers it chose in each city mirrored the kinds of lifestyles and interests native to the show’s adherents as well, a roster that



The tour’s “Rickmobile” became a social-media sensation, as thousands of attendees eagerly posed for photos with the custom-made steel, foam, and fiberglass effigy.

featured the pop-culture-shaping Comic-Con International in San Diego, the hipster bar Tattooed Mom in Philadelphia, and the cinemaphile-favorite Alamo Drafthouse movie theater in Austin. Other audience-centric destinations would include comic book stores, pizza parlors, and various local festivals.

In contrast to the brash Rickmobile, the planned promotion for the forthcoming tour possessed a much lower profile. Instead of buying any kind of nationwide advertising that would have certainly been appropriate for a show and tour that spanned the entire country, Adult Swim — knowing that the more something feels like a conventional ad to Millennials, the less interested they are — opted for a pared-down social-media approach. It posted the tour dates and locations on its website and Facebook page while also promoting the nearly six dozen stops on its social-media channels, such as Twitter and Instagram.

For all the impending road show’s expansive reach and the Rickmobile’s visual audacity, Adult Swim’s goals were modest. With no real baseline to compare to, it hoped to attract several hundred fans at each stop and build its online community with several thousand social-media posts and engagements (the latter defined as public shares, likes, and comments). Adult Swim also set a goal of selling at least \$100,000 worth of merchandise during the tour, which would help offset the expense of the road show.

The Big Rick

On May 11 of last year, the tour hit the road with the same manic energy the title characters displayed when battling infectious diseases inside of a hobo whose body housed a microscopic theme park or partying with the combined clone of Abraham Lincoln and Adolf Hitler. During the

Dressed to Thrill

Enthusiastic fans of Adult Swim’s hit show often arrived at a tour stop dressed as their favorite characters. Their social-media posts helped the “Don’t Even Trip Road Trip” amass more than 50 million impressions on Twitter and Instagram.



RICKMOBILE @rickmobile
Open your eyes, Morty!!
#sacramento #rickmobile

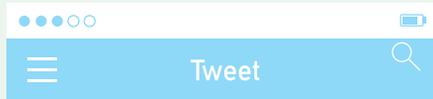


RICKMOBILE @rickmobile
MORTY MORTY *burp* there's a Pickle Rick at the Alamo Drafthouse Austin today from 6-9pm! #rickmobile #rickandmorty



Shop 'Till You Drop

The tour's pop-up retail store offered fans more than 60 styles of show-themed merchandise, ranging from freaky action figures to funky socks. Attendees gleefully shared photos of their purchased on social media.



macaroon moonbeam @FoldyHolds
 @ZenMonkeyStudio you guys are always the raddest! Thanks for the pin to add to my collection :D #RickMobile



Justin Roiland @JustinRoiland
 Here she is ladies and gentleman. This isn't your grandma's inflatable!



Sarah Chalke @sarahchalke
 Me and Charlie kickin it in our new favorite @RickandMorty socks #rickmobile #fingertoes



tour's very first stop in Atlanta's iconic Little Five Points neighborhood, it became clear that the Don't Even Trip Road Trip had become every bit as much a hit as the series itself.

Well before the full-time staff of two drivers, a tour manager, a location/logistics manager, and two assistants (plus roughly a dozen locally hired brand ambassadors) arrived for the two- to three-hour-long setup, an onslaught of hundreds of fans were already turning out. Alerted to the road show through social media and word of mouth, many attendees dressed in "Rick and Morty" wigs and costumes (including some in getups representing the time Rick turned himself into a killer pickle to avoid a therapy session) while others carted signs or brought homemade art inspired by their favorite show.

While most staffers carried out the setup, one served as a line manager, directing guests to queue for the pop-up shop. To occupy their time before the storefront was ready, the staffer emceed a few rounds of "Rick and Morty" trivia with guests — again, an exercise appealing to the intricate knowledge of show lore that let fans prove they were smart insiders — and awarded themed stickers or pins in exchange for correct answers. Attendees waited and played, and some purchased smaller items, such as pins, hats, and action figures, from another staffer who wheeled a cart alongside guests.

For those who didn't want to idle in line, a tent stocked with T-shirts offered an opportunity to take home a quick souvenir. The vast majority of others, however, were content to queue up, play trivia, post on social media, and take pictures of each other in their "Rick and Morty" regalia. When they finally made it to the front of the line and entered the

pop-up shop, attendees pored over the dozens of items for sale, including an aluminum retro spaceship, a "Rick and Morty" Monopoly board game, plush likenesses of the show's characters, and an assortment of hoodies, socks, and backpacks. Playing again to guests' often-touted cleverness and their knowledge of the show, marketers added subtle, almost-subliminal design flourishes, such as the van's C137 RM license plate, which refers to Dimension C-137 from which the titular characters hail.

Even with much-coveted swag for sale, the photo op proved its equal in popularity, as attendees took scores of selfies and other shots of the 5-ton Rick with hair the color of blue cotton candy and irises like black asterisks. It was an activity tailor-made for the Instagram age, as evidenced by the



Event staffers gave waiting attendees a chance to showcase their love of the show by peppering them with "Rick and Morty" trivia questions.

fact that guests organically spread awareness of the tour — and the upcoming season of “Rick and Morty” — via their social networks.

The kickoff in Atlanta, with its mass turnout, costumed attendees, and boisterous photographing of the Rickmobile, turned out to be a model that prevailed for the remaining stops. Crisscrossing the country from Massachusetts to Oregon and Michigan to Texas, the Don’t Even Trip Road Trip attracted many times more than the expected attendance (mostly through social media) at each stop. One continuing but wholly unexpected sign of the tour’s success was that, like in Atlanta, many guests brought their DIY art to show off, which event staff hung in the pop-up shop until the handiwork homages to “Rick and Morty” virtually covered every available inch of wall space. Another sure indication was that numerous fans often arrived at a designated stop around midnight before the tour pulled in, meaning that, with start times occasionally as late as 6 p.m., dozens of guests waited up to 18 hours to see the Rickmobile and pick up much-desired merchandise.

In Tampa, FL, the tour shut down and left early because fans poured out in droves, bringing traffic in the neighborhood to a standstill, much to the displeasure of its residents. In Chicago, the flood of fans quickly depleted the inventory of products on hand, inciting one disappointed guest to hijack a Morty sandwich board before being tackled by other attendees. Such desperation led Adult Swim to limit purchases to two items per guest for a portion of the tour despite generally effective logistical tactics, which included a merchandise-filled truck that trailed the Rickmobile throughout the tour, replenishing itself from warehouse facilities along the way.

That’s All, Folks

The tour’s reception was so favorable that Adult Swim expanded it in early November, adding 14 more stops in 12 additional cities for a grand total of 67 and 44, respectively. By the time the tour slowed to a halt in December after a seven-month run, it had accumulated an extraordinary record. Instead of the 300 to 400 expected

Gizmodo, Nerdist, Paste, Access Hollywood, and Mental Floss, among many others. Summing up the tour and the way Adult Swim translated its knowledge of “Rick and Morty” viewers into a supremely effective event, one Corporate Event Awards judge described the unconventional road show as “a simple concept that achieved stellar results because Adult



The pop-up retail store was so popular with attendees that Adult Swim had to limit purchases to two items per guest for a portion of the tour.

guests per stop, an average of about 1,200 showed, totaling nearly 83,000. Sales of merchandise matched the profuse attendance, racking up nearly \$2 million gleaned from 50,000-plus transactions, well above the \$100,000 goal Adult Swim set for itself. Even more impressive was the online campaign. The Don’t Even Trip Road Trip mustered 27,461 social-media posts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and other online forums, along with 254,725 public shares, likes, and comments. Most of all, the tour generated an astonishing 50 million impressions on Twitter and Instagram alone.

The nationwide event’s fervent reception in both the virtual and the real world drew attention from a broad swath of mainstream media that counted Vice, Playboy, Mashable,

Swim keenly understood the many nuances of its audience.”

Outstanding as the metrics are, they mean even more because they lit a fuse that ignited an even-greater popularity for the show. According to Nielsen, the third season of “Rick and Morty” ranked as the highest-rated show in the history of the Adult Swim programming bloc. And just as the truest measure of success for a show is simply if it’s renewed, Adult Swim sent the Don’t Even Trip Road Trip back on the road in May 2018. Cruising its way into 58 cities, the promotional tour once again offered legions of passionate fans a pleasure as endless as the alternate universes in “Rick and Morty” itself. **E**

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