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TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES

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The half-finished skatepark was a sore spot for Newport, Oregon. In 2000, the skatepark's construction funds ran dry, and conditions steadily deteriorated. "It was in dire need of repair," says Noah Smith, a lifelong skateboarder and the brand manager and photographer for Rogue Ales & Spirits, based in Newport.

One core Rogue value is helping its community. Several years ago, the brewery joined forces with pro skateboarder Kevin Kowalski and Dreamland Skateparks to overhaul the park, pouring fresh concrete and adding new features. Rogue contributed one too: Dreamland American Lager, released in partnership with Dreamland Skateparks. (The park was completed in 2019.)

Rogue earmarks a portion of sales proceeds for building skateparks elsewhere, and the can's label features the project's story and a skateboarder cruising past rocket ships and a floating trowel. In a different context, the label might seem pandering. How do you do, fellow kids? Crush that kick-flip with our lager!

The crucial difference is that Rogue came by its collaboration honestly, dreamed up in DIY spirit and not a marketing deck. "It's not forced," Smith says, adding that he's seen big Instagram engagement with skateboarders. "Through this project, we've been able to connect with the skateboarding audience."

A decade ago, breweries found eager audiences for fledgling beers and brands. Brewing great beer, or even so-so stuff in an underserved market, could attract drinkers and media attention. Nowadays, simply existing is no longer unique in this teeming marketplace, thousands of breweries creating hoppy white noise.

To sing singular tunes, breweries are looking beyond the beer industry and seeking out brand collaborations that create crossover audiences. Here's how breweries are reaching beyond the beer aisle.

Looking Beyond Brewery-on-Brewery Collaborations

Throughout the 2010s, breweries linked hands and hops in the hopes of building buzz. Collaborating on a beer with an up-and-coming brewery generate huge interest and hype. "Things got stale pretty quickly just working with other breweries," says Rachel Bradley, the marketing manager and photographer for DuClaw Brewing in Bel Air, Maryland.

Several years ago, DuClaw shifted to non-beer collaborations. In 2019, DuClaw debuted the glitter-filled Sour Me Unicorn Farts sour ale done with Diablo Doughnuts. Two years later, DuClaw ran back Sour Me with a twist: The brewery worked with Squatty Potty—the stool better positions your body in the bathroom—and the Colon Cancer Foundation on a giveaway: complete a fecal test in return for beer, the so-called Crap Challenge.

Follow-up collaborations included Three Scoops, a stout inspired by Neapolitan ice cream that benefitted the Bottleshare charity. For Hopportunity Awaits, DuClaw partnered with Craft x EDU on an IPA that features the faces and stories of brewing industry professionals. Beer sales will help fund an industry grant. “Hopefully that we can do every year,” Bradley says.

Instead of brewery partnerships, Chicago brewery Hop Butcher for the World looks to highlight its hometown. “Whether we’re naming a beer or coming up with an ingredient idea, the first place we always start is Chicago,” says Jeremiah Zimmer, a founder of the IPA-focused brewery. “What is Chicago known for?”

Hop Butcher has previously made IPAs such as Beef Dipped, a nod to the Italian-beef sandwich, and Neon Green Relish that celebrates the technicolor hot dog topping. Last December, Hop Butcher collaborated with local brand Frango Chocolate on an imperial stout starring the mint oil used to make the company’s chocolates, a holiday favorite.

The stout taps an emotional vein beyond an Untappd rating. “Maybe there’s someone out there that doesn’t buy Hop Butcher or craft beer and they heard that there was a Frango beer,” Zimmer says. “If they’re just obsessed with Frango, they’re the ones trying to get a four-pack.”

Brewing since 1829, D. G. Yuengling & Son is one of Pennsylvania’s stalwart brands. The brewery tapped Keystone State icon Hershey’s to create Yuengling Hershey’s Chocolate Porter, first released on draft in 2019. The childhood pleasure recontextualized as a grown-up treat became a big hit and entered bottles the following year, the fall release timed well with Halloween.

“By forming partnerships and making connections around consumer passion points, we increase visibility for the brand and invite more consumers to try our portfolio of beers,” says Tyler Simpson, the executive director of marketing for Yuengling.

Food brands are also finding brewery collaborations to be beneficial. Breweries regularly lace stouts and IPAs alike with lactose, the unfermentable milk sugar that lends a sweet and smooth character. What about plant-based milks?

Elmhurst 1925 is a former dairy that ditched cows for milks made from cashews, oats and other plants. Several years ago, Elmhurst 1925 partnered with 42 North Brewing to make a cocktail-inspired hazy IPA featuring its cashew milk. Using plant-base makes sense if you parse the data. “In many cases, you know, people buying c were also buying plant-based milk,” says Heba Mahmoud, the senior director of brand marketing.

The company next supplied its oat milk to Dogfish Head to create the IPA Hazy-O! The brewery released the IPA in early 2021, and select retailers sold the beer in cobranded merchandising racks that featured six-packs and cartons of oat milk. “We’ve been able to capitalize on each other’s audiences,” Mahmoud says.

Seeking Alliances in Sports

Sports and beer have a hand-in-glove relationship. Fans crack cold beers while watching games, and they celebrate playing sports with rounds and pitchers. The globe’s biggest breweries often broadly advertise during professional football, soccer and baseball games, but those sponsorship deals break an average brewery’s budget.

Instead, breweries are seeking out sports partnerships that make sense from a geographic perspective. Roadhouse Brewing is based in the skiing mecca of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. For a fresh spin on the après-ski drinking tradition, Roadhouse joined outdoor apparel store Stio to create Loose Boats, a lower-alcohol IPA suited for pounding after powder runs. “If you’re a skier or snowboarder, you immediately know what’s going on,” says brewmaster Max Shafer.

Roadhouse is now planning a summertime release in tandem with Tower Paddle Boards, finding synergy with the area’s stand-up paddleboard culture. “We’re hoping to tap into more potential Roadhouse customers,” Shafer says.

Breweries are also looking to partner with professional sports teams and athletes too. Last year, British brewery Thornbridge made beers for cricketer Joe Root and Sheffield Wednesday Football Club. Chicago brewery Revolution worked with Chicago Fire Football Club on the Hazy Pitch pale ale.

In another approach, colleges are linking up with local breweries to create custom beers that can be enjoyed before, during or after sporting events. Notable examples include the Old Aggie lager that New Belgium makes for Colorado State University, and Karbach Brewing’s 12th Man Lager that’s produced in tandem with Texas A&M.

Deschutes Brewery in Bend, Oregon, is taking a larger though no less targeted approach as the official craft beer of the Pac-12 Conference. Members colleges are largely in the West Coast, Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountain region, a footprint encompassing most of the brewery’s sales volume.

Collaborations Should Be Partnerships, Not Sponsorships

Beer can be a consumable status symbol. Hold a can, take an Instagram pic and crush the liquid. More and more, breweries are collaborating with fashion brands and athletic companies to create shoes and clothing that serve as billboards that people will pay to wear.

Modelo partnered with fashion brands on capsule streetwear collections, while Italian shoe brand M. Gemi worked with Peroni on luxe white sneakers. Fashion label Social-Work linked with Tsingtao on clothing featuring the Chinese brewery's signature brown and green colors.

Last year, Deschutes collaborated with Brooks Running, which is headquartered in Seattle, on the "Run Hoppy Collection." The initiative—a riff on the company's "run happy" motto—featured a limited-edition IPA and apparel, including a Deschutes-branded shoe. The collaboration presented clear alignment to Neal Stewart, the vice president of sales and marketing at Deschutes. "Our consumers are very fitness- and exercise-minded," Stewart says.

More importantly, the collaboration was a two-way street. "We had a ton of say into how those shoes were designed and input into how that collaboration was brought to life," Stewart says.

Communication is an essential ingredient in collaborations with Roadhouse. "We like having an open dialogue about our passions and overall interests," Shafer says. "I always ask people, 'What kind of beers do you like to drink that Roadhouse doesn't make? What flavors are you drawn to?'" Shafer sends collaboration partners a sensory packet filled with assorted hops and solicits feedback. "We're really making sure that people are involved with it across both companies," he says.

Zimmer of Hop Butcher proactively seeks out collaborations, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. One day, Zimmer contacted Sweet Baby Ray's, a Chicago-based brand of barbecue sauce. No thanks. Another time Zimmer sent a box of Hop Butcher beer to Madame ZuZu's, a tea shop owned by Smashing Pumpkins front man Billy Corgan and his wife, Chloe Mendel.

Mendel later emailed Zimmer, sparking a conversation that led to Hop Butcher creating Soul Head. Released in 2021, the IPA celebrated the 30th anniversary of Smashing Pumpkins album *Gish*. "I love the Smashing Pumpkins, but they're also a Chicago institution," Zimmer says.

Done badly, a collaboration can come across as a cash grab. Done well, a brand partnership can generate fresh sales synergies, connecting to consumers stomachs, memories and emotions. “We want people to notice and buy our beer, but there’s got to be a story behind it,” Zimmer says.

By Josh Bernstein

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