

## MARKETING (/MARKETING)

# The newest restaurant marketing target: 'Kidults'

Restaurant chains have been pushing colorful beverages, toys and collectibles, and partnerships with movies and television, all aimed at nostalgic adults. There's a good reason: It works.

By **Jonathan Maze** (/profile/jonathan-maze) on Aug. 15, 2025



Kidults are the latest marketing target for restaurant chains. | Illustration by Nico Heins/Midjourney

McDonald's latest marketing effort features a meal with either Chicken McNuggets or a burger, a blue milkshake with pink whipped cream that tastes like blueberry and a half-dozen collectible tins featuring the chain's characters, including Ronald McDonald. There is also a virtual-reality experience in which customers can walk through the burger giant's fantasy world, McDonaldland.

But kids aren't the target market. McDonald's is largely targeting adult nostalgia with the meal, hoping to lure those who recall their youth visiting the chain's McDonaldland play areas. It's the latest nostalgia play for the fast-food brand.

And it's the latest in a growing trend in the restaurant space, in which brands are targeting a group of consumers known as "kidults."



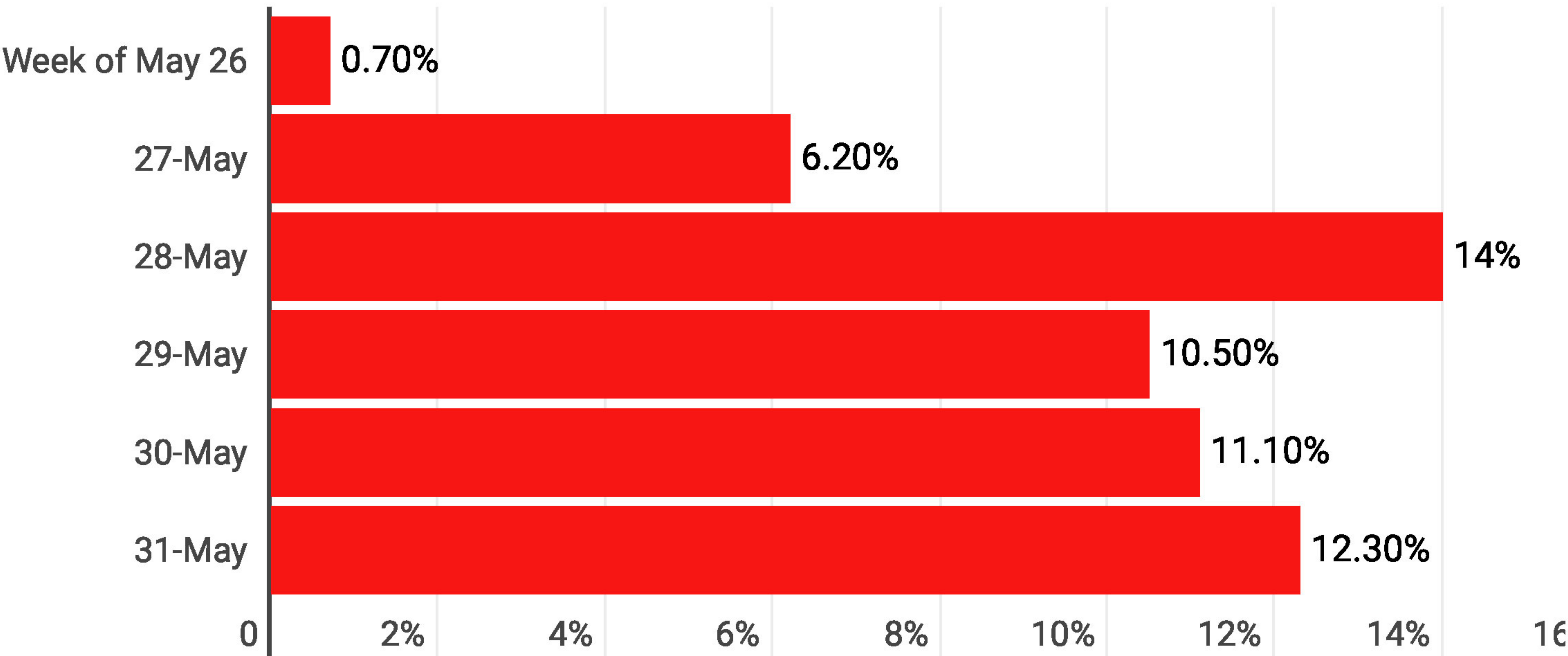
In short, a kidult is someone 12 or older who does things one might have ordinarily thought of as the purview of children. It comes out most often in the form of toys or collectibles. A kidult is often thought of as a young adult in the Gen Z or Millennial generations, but they can be any age.

There’s a good reason that restaurants are targeting this group. It works.

McDonald’s in April generated strong sales when it lasered in on this demographic with its Minecraft Movie promotion. Traffic spiked at Burger King in late May after it released its How to Train Your Dragon meal. Kidult marketing also helps chains raise funds for charity and even communicate the availability of new services using collectibles aimed at adults.

## Kidult promotions drive traffic

Visits to Burger King restaurants increased in late May after the chain introduced its How to Train Your Dragon Meal. The graphic shows visits to Burger King the week before the promotion started, then traffic compared with the average for those specific days afterward.



Source: Placer.ai

“We’re seeing the rise of kidults, and we’re seeing it play out in the restaurant industry,” said Julia Foley, senior insight and strategy supervisor with C3, a Kansas-based company that helps restaurants target families through marketing programs.

## Stealing toy industry strategies

The toy business has known about this group for years. And in recent years, adults have become that industry’s biggest customer.



Last year, consumers 18 years or older bought more toys than any other age group, surpassing preschoolers for the first time, **according to data from the consulting firm Circana (<https://www.circana.com/post/toy-industry-us-sales-grow-in-early-2025>)**.

That group continues to drive growth in the toy industry. Sales grew 12% in the first quarter of this year, according to Circana. Total toy industry sales grew 6%. Adults spent \$1.8 billion on toys.

**According to the Toy Association (<https://www.toyassociation.org/toys/research-and-data/reports/trends/trends-and-products.aspx?WebsiteKey=9627b778-d394-4eb1-93ca-boecde8e3359>)**, 73% of parents said they bought toys for themselves.

The restaurant industry has long had a relatively close association with the toy industry, thanks to the advent of childrens' meals and the desire to target families. So it wouldn't take much for restaurants to begin adopting the toy industry's strategies.

According to a C3 survey last year, 81% of Gen Z and Millennial consumers either like or love restaurant brand collectibles. And 78% of those consumers said they would make a special trip to the restaurant to get one of those collectibles. More than three-quarters said that such promotions get their attention.

"What we do for kids and adults is create those emotional connections between consumers and brands through memorable experiences," Foley said. "That tangible item can create those tangible experiences."

Nostalgia also plays a huge role. According to the Toy Association, 49% of parents who collect or play with toys as an adult do so to relive childhood memories.

McDonald's has been playing the nostalgia card like a Las Vegas gambler for years.

The fast-food giant for years has either sold or given away collectibles but it has turned up the intensity on its reach to kidults in recent years. In 2022, for instance, it sold an "adult Happy Meal" with figurines from Cactus Plant Flea Market—four-eyed versions of popular characters like Birdie and Hamburglar.



McDonald's 2022 adult Happy Meal promotion generated strong sales for the chain. | Photo courtesy of McDonald's.



Half of those figurines were sold in the first four days. Traffic the first week of the promotion jumped 29%, according to the foot traffic tracking firm Placer.ai. The company was able to tap into the nostalgia of the Happy Meal. “We knew we were onto something, but it was wild,” Jennifer Healan, currently VP of U.S. marketing, brand, content and culture for McDonald’s, said at the time.

## Sales success

Unsurprisingly, much of the fast-food space has jumped onto the bandwagon. Wendy’s last year introduced its “Krabby Patty Kollab” menu items featuring a Krabby Patty Kollab Burger and a Pineapple Under the Sea Frosty, all in partnership with the Nickelodeon program Spongebob Squarepants. The popular cartoon was celebrating its 25th anniversary. ’



Wendy's same-store sales soared 10% last October after it introduced its Krabby Patty Kollab meal. | Photo courtesy of Wendy's

Same-store sales increased 10% the month of the promotion. Wendy's is trying again now with the “Meal of Misfortune” featuring a 10-piece nuggets, small fries and a “Raven’s Blood” Frosty in custom packaging that says, “There’s nothing happy about this meal.” There are also four “mystery sauces.” It’s all done in conjunction with the Netflix program “Wednesday.”

Burger King in May introduced its How to Train Your Dragon meal, with a “Dragon Flame-Grilled Whopper” featuring a red-and-orange marbled bun, Fiery Dragon Mozzarella Fries, Soaring Strawberry Lemonade and Viking’s Chocolate Sundae. The collaboration “is going to be fun for both kids and kids at heart,” Joel Yashinsky, chief marketing officer for Burger King U.S., said in a statement at the time.





Burger King traffic spiked with its How to Train Your Dragon meal. | Photo courtesy of Burger King.

According to Placer.ai data, traffic to Burger King restaurants on May 26 was up just 0.7%. On May 27, the day it was introduced, it rose 6.1%. On May 28, it was up 14%, and traffic was up in double digits each of the next three days. Burger King's same-store sales rose 1.5% in the quarter, suggesting the meal helped the chain generate sales growth.

McDonald's introduced its Minecraft Meal in late April, the chain's largest global marketing event. It featured a Minecraft Happy Meal, but also an adult-focused meal with one of six Minecraft-themed collectibles. Traffic was 12.2% above average on April 1, the day the promotion came out. McDonald's ran out of the figurines in less than two weeks.

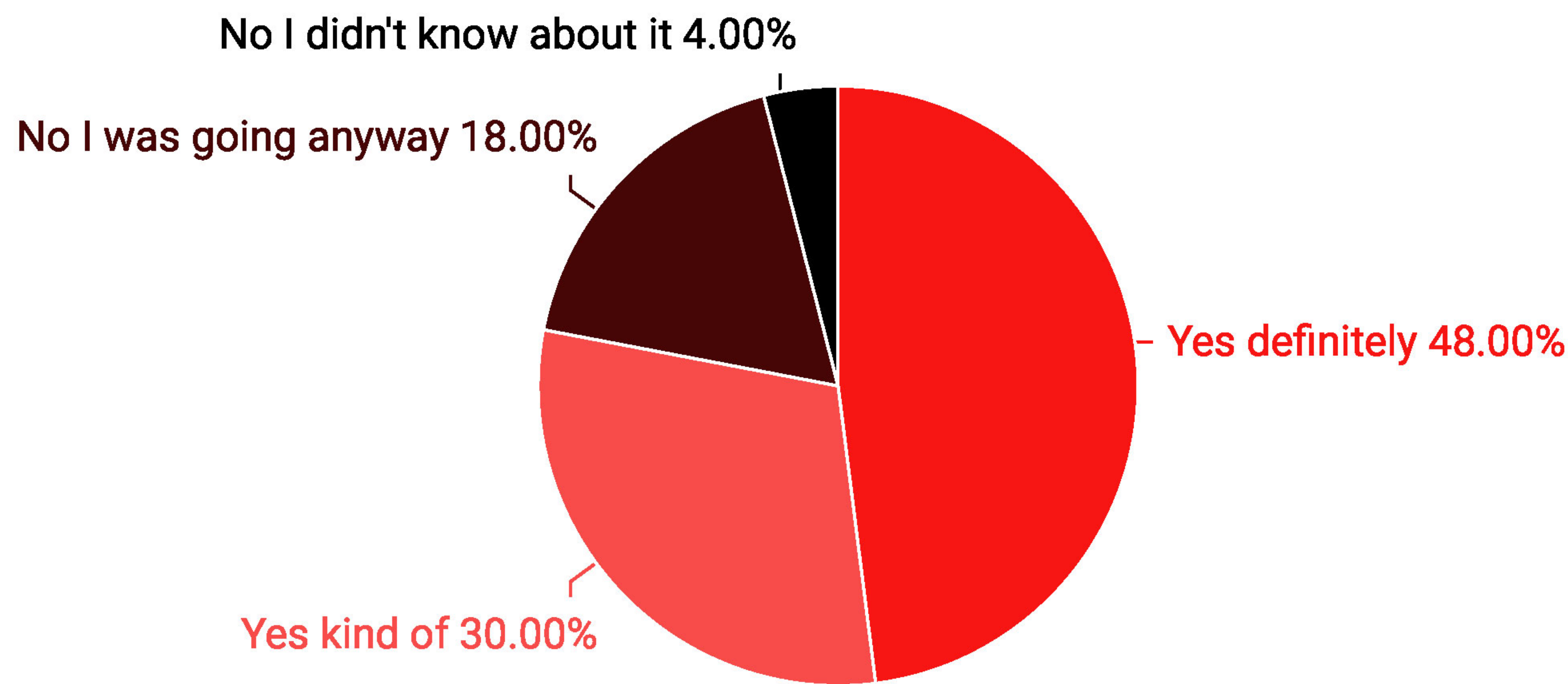
The company's newest effort, the McDonaldland meal, features a collaboration with the retailer Pacsun on limited-edition, kidult targeted merchandise—which restaurant chains have been pushing aggressively in recent years—along with the Mt. McDonaldland Shake, which is clearly geared for social media. One franchisee said they expect the meal to “kill it” with consumers.

Social media is clearly driving a lot of this marketing. “There's a buzzworthy, TikTok worthy aspect to it,” Foley said. “It's also Gen Z, emerging adulthood. They're not completely adults yet and still want that joy of childhood.”



# People make special trips for kidult promotions

Gen Z and Millennial customers say they will make a special trip to a restaurant for promotions involving collectibles.



Source: C3

## Sticker shock

It’s not just the traditional fast-food space. Much of the beverage space is geared toward kidults with colorful, customizable beverages that people boast about on social media. That has helped drive sales at beverage concepts such as Swig and 7 Brew.

The Grants Pass, Oregon-based chain Dutch Bros, meanwhile, has made stickers a part of the company culture. The chain gives out stickers on the first Wednesday of the month and on special days such as Mother’s Day.

“We have sticker collectors out there,” CEO Christine Barone told analysts in June, according to a transcript on the financial services site AlphaSense. “It’s become a special part of our culture.” It also helps the company send messages to customers, such as when it started offering mobile order and pay. Dutch Bros put messages about mobile order on the back of those stickers.





Stickers have become part of the culture at Dutch Bros. | Photo courtesy of Dutch Bros.

“Yeah, kids aren’t driving those cars there,” said Jonathan Bowyer, business development director with C3. “Those are adults making those trips to get a sticker.”

It’s not just limited-service restaurants. Outback Steakhouse recently brought back its Jaws-themed cocktail, the Aussie Jawsie cocktail, served with sharks that pour grenadine from their mouths. Kura Sushi, the revolving sushi chain, give-away keychains for every 15 sushi plates, featuring different sushi versions under glass on a small plate. **The company recently announced ([https://x.com/kurasushi\\_usa/status/1955676406974972396](https://x.com/kurasushi_usa/status/1955676406974972396))** a partnership with Japanese anime program Demon Slayer for an upcoming, exclusive set of collectibles.

Holiday merch sales have long been part of the kidult marketing effort. So has charitable efforts. Raising Cane’s nearly two decades ago began selling a special Cane’s Plush Puppy. Funds from the sale of the puppies are donated to local pet charities.

C3 President Jennifer Loper worked with Cane’s on that promotion, which has returned every year. She realized that the puppies were targeting more than just kids when she saw adults on social media showing off their collections.

“Don’t underestimate the power of cute,” Foley said. “And then when the proceeds go to charity, that was also a motivating factor.”



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