

# Big Mac Daddies

## Seeking street cred, McDonald's hips up the threads.

By Thomas Mucha, July 7, 2005

Polyester may never be the same if McDonald's (MCD) marketers get their way. The fast-food giant revealed this week that it's devising a plan to transform employee uniforms into hip street wear. Yes, I mean those ugly threads burger-flippers and cashiers soil as they dole out the Big Macs. Of course, McDonald's has zero fashion cred, especially when it comes to street designs, so it's reaching out to a long list of urban clothiers that reportedly includes P. Diddy's Sean Jean, Russell Simmons's Phat Farm, Fubu, and Rocawear, among others. Why the sartorial push for urban chic? McDonald's spokesman Bill Whitman says, "Our employees are brand ambassadors. So we're looking to find a more contemporary look and feel that they'll be proud to wear inside and outside the restaurant."

Here's the thinking: From a branding perspective, hipper threads would complement the company's continuing image makeover, one aimed squarely at the slippery 10- to 24-year-old demographic. McDonald's, you see, desperately wants to be cool to kids. It has hired Justin Timberlake and Destiny's Child to shake and groove to its "I'm Lovin' It" advertising campaign. It has signed entertainment marketing firm Maven Strategies to help persuade hip-hop artists to slip Big Mac references into lyrics. And now it's turning to the likes of P. Diddy and Russell Simmons to freshen up employee fashion. (Whitman tells me the plan is in the "early stages," and he won't give it a timetable.) "As our advertising shows, we want to be relevant to young adults and teens," Whitman says. "We feel strongly that clothing can help embody that spirit."

Of course, there's nothing new about this spiffy-corporate-uniform strategy. Delta hired Kate Spade to design the outfits worn by its Song airline employees. W Hotels looked to Kenneth Cole to add fashion pizzazz to its labor force. Even the Italian police are decked out in Armani. And there's certainly nothing novel about using hip-hop elements in marketing. Hip-hop record sales alone generate an estimated \$2 billion a year, while the music is featured in advertising campaigns peddling cars, sneakers, soda, and just about everything else.

But plenty of youth marketing pros I talked to think updating fashion is a great idea, particularly for McDonald's. The youth demographic is made up of some 33 million consumers, who spend \$250 billion to \$300 billion a year. That market power alone makes it a prime target for McDonald's. But more fundamentally, teens (and adults, for that matter) use fashion to express their identity. So it makes sense that McDonald's would try to connect with this group through hipper clothes.

There's a strategic marketing benefit too: Happier workers lead to happier customers. "If employees feel cool about what they're wearing, their own self-esteem goes up and they'll feel better about delivering a McDonald's experience," says Allen Adamson, managing director at branding consultancy Landor. They might even wear their McDonald's duds to schools, parties, and clubs -- think thousands of walking, talking, branding billboards.

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— Tom Murcott of New York City-based Renegade Marketing

Don't laugh. A number of companies already have such ambulatory advertisements. Matt Diamond, CEO of Manhattan-based youth marketing agency Alloy, points out that fashionable teens are now sporting retro brands ironed onto their T-shirts -- Big Boy, Coca-Cola, Hawaiian Punch, and the like. "McDonald's has one of

those classic brands too," Diamond says. "This could really catch on." More important, urban trendsetters like P. Diddy, Simmons, and others continually set the tone for what's cool in American pop and commercial culture -- a fact not lost on McDonald's marketers, who have ridden a hipper image to 21 consecutive monthly sales gains. "They're hitting on the key things that are relevant to the youth market," Diamond says.

The trick here, marketing pros say, will be in the execution. The other main customer base for McDonald's is Mom, Dad, and the little ones. So there's the difficulty of striking the right balance. "Wholesome and good can be boring. Hip and trendy can be scary," Adamson warns. Tom Murcott of New York City-based Renegade Marketing agrees: "It's not going to be about the bling," he says. "They're not going to push the designs that far."

McDonald's promises it will strike the right balance. "This is a family brand," Whitman says. "You're not going to see anything that runs counter to that essence." It's worth noting that P. Diddy, Russell Simmons, Fubu, and the others are hardly cutting-edge. They're mainstream brands, just like McDonald's. "If they hired more avant-garde designers, they'd just have to spend time explaining who they were," Murcott says. "But cooler uniforms will help. It's just one of many things giving McDonald's more street cred."