

# We will not stop until the world dreams in cheese: Redefining the Wisconsin cheese brand

Received (in revised form): 15th January, 2021



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Suzanne Fanning is the Chief Marketing Officer of Wisconsin's US\$44-bn dairy industry. Fanning, whose marketing experience spans more than 25 years, brings a unique approach to her work that has revolutionised how consumers think about Wisconsin Cheese. Since assuming her role in 2017, Fanning has built a fierce team of skilled marketers and leads efforts to elevate perceptions of Wisconsin Cheese. She focuses on branding, digital, advertising, public relations, consumer events and channel/retail marketing. Her accomplishments in this role have been numerous as she and her team have set a Guinness World Record and taken home two Gold REGGIE Awards from the Association of National Advertisers in addition to winning Best In Show from the American Marketing Association. Their strategies are quickly catching nationwide attention, and they have racked up over US\$50m in earned media coverage with major features on *The Today Show*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and *The Kelly Clarkson Show* and in publications such as *The New York Times* and *Food & Wine*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Entrepreneur*, *PRWeek* and *The Chicago Tribune* have all praised Fanning's work throughout her successful career, calling her 'one of social media's top movers and shakers', and 'one of the world's best marketers'. She has also been recognised with a People's award, reserved for professionals who have raised the bar in the food industry.

## Abstract

*This paper analyses Wisconsin Cheese's way out of the branding problem it had five years ago. It discusses how Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin decided to rebuild the brand from the ground up. Consumers' perceptions used to revolve around big, boring blocks of factory cheddar instead of the reality of more than 600 varieties, types and styles of cheese that are made in Wisconsin. The hardest thing a brand can undertake is to go from mass to class. Wisconsin wins more awards for cheese than any other state or country. Needs were identified to build a strong and consistent brand, to be better storytellers to the world and to build authentic relationships with real cheese lovers. With a new logo, new websites, a more creative corporate culture, relationships with Food Fanatics who help drive the speciality cheese marketplace and increased media presence, Wisconsin announced itself, and proved itself, as the State of Cheese. Now, sales of Wisconsin speciality cheese outpace all others in that category, Wisconsin Cheese has more website visitors than ever before, they achieved over US\$40m in national and local media mentions in the last year, they have brand ambassadors in all 50 states and are on page one for Google searches for 'cheese'. This paper details how they did it.*

## Keywords

*Wisconsin, cheese, rebranding, brand, public relations, relationships, branding, marketing, community, word of mouth, social media*

## THE PROBLEM

Five years ago we embarked on a brand study for Wisconsin Cheese — not just a study of one brand, but of *all* the state's cheeses as a category — to see what consumers thought and how it compared

with competitors in the US and abroad. What we discovered was some good news and some bad news. Yes, when consumers think of cheese they *do* think of Wisconsin, but they think of big blocks of cheddar and 'factory cheese'. Most consumers

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could not name any specific Wisconsin cheese brands, and, to make matters worse, one-third of consumers could not even name a single variety of cheese made in Wisconsin. When describing cheese from our state, respondents used words such as ‘ordinary’, ‘everyday’, and ‘boring’, while when describing our European counterparts, they used words such as ‘sophisticated’, ‘special’ and ‘unique’.

What’s wrong with that? Well, lots.

Fact #1 — Wisconsin makes about half the speciality cheese in the country, so we are much more than cheddar. We actually make over 600 varieties, types and styles of cheese.

Fact #2 — Wisconsin wins more awards than any other state or country in global competitions, so that ‘ordinary’ and ‘boring’ stuff was *all* wrong.

But there is so much more that makes Wisconsin the special cheese state that it is. Wisconsin is the only state in the US that requires a licence to make cheese. We are the only place outside of Switzerland where one can become a Master Cheesemaker (which takes over a decade). We are leaders in dairy and fund the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research. In fact, we have been making cheese in Wisconsin since before Wisconsin was even a state. So anyone can see that we are a state totally obsessed with cheese, and, of course, everyone should know we make the best. As Maine is to lobster, France is to wine and Switzerland is to watches, so should Wisconsin be to cheese. But the problem was, we were not. And so we set out on a journey to close the perception gap. The hardest thing a brand can undertake is to go from mass to class. Building a reputation for a new brand or product is much easier than changing a current reputation that is so strongly embedded in the minds of consumers. It would be difficult but not totally impossible. We know that before the 1970s no real wine enthusiast

would have ever considered drinking wine from California, because everyone thought the best wine came from France. With that in mind, we knew we just needed our ‘Judgement of Paris’ moment<sup>1</sup>, but we also knew that was not likely. What we *could* do, however, was to *build a strong and consistent brand, to be better storytellers to the world and to build authentic relationships* with real cheese lovers that would begin a ripple effect culminating in a Wisconsin Cheese tidal wave.

## BUILDING A STRONG AND CONSISTENT BRAND

Building a brand is about so much more than a new logo or website (although we did get a new logo and website). It is the sum total of your customers’ perception and experience. It represents who you are, from the philosophy, to the culture, to the feelings your fans have about your brand. A strong brand identity will help achieve the following:

- Send a clear message about who you are
- Help you outdo your competitors
- Build trust/recognition/emotional connection among your fans
- Provide clarity to staff in everything they do

It should carry through in everything you do, from your tone of voice to social media to your website. We decided to start with a keystone piece — a brand mantra to answer the question ‘Why Wisconsin?’

### *‘Why Wisconsin’ Communications Platform*

*Some states dream of cars, or coal or craft beer or whatever it is that floats their boats. Wisconsin is completely bonkers for cheese, and we will never understand why everyone everywhere on the planet does not feel the same way.*

*The thing is, we have had cheese on the brain for quite a while. Our ancestors were expert dairy*

*farmers and cheesemakers. They chose Wisconsin because the terroir — the soil and water nurtured by the goodness of glacial sediment — reminded them of the homes they had left behind in Northern Europe. They started making cheese commercially as early as 1841 and, when the chinch bug killed the wheat harvest in 1855, it seems like everyone else in the state started dairy farming or trying their hands at making cheese. So, you see, making cheese is Wisconsin's birthright — it is in our blood, it is in the dirt beneath our feet, it is in the air we breathe — it is who we are.*

*It is not in our nature as Wisconsinites to rest on our laurels, even if we wanted to. That is why we never stop experimenting, trying to improve, dreaming of your next favourite cheeses that we have yet to even imagine.*

*We believe in the power of cheese to make the world a better place. Great cheese can elevate any mood, any meal, or any social occasion. We know because we produce more great cheese than any other place on earth. And we will not stop until the world dreams of cheese as we do.*

*Some people dream in colour, some in black and white.*

*Some states dream in oil; others in bikini-covered beaches or barrel-aged bourbon.*

*We dream in cheese.*

Honestly, change starts from within, and so our first task was to get everyone in the office on board, because if our team did not live and breathe this mantra, we did not stand a chance of convincing others. How could a cheese marketing organisation not have a single cheese case in the entire office? Why were there no wooden cheese wheels hanging on the walls? From internal cheese tastings, farm visits and themed conference rooms to turning our gigantic, outdated mailing room (remember before digital when brands had to do mass mailings?) into a state-of-the-art prep kitchen and model cheese shop, pretty soon, we all felt immersed in the brand

## Brand Values

Our Values guide the words we use and the actions we take. Our every behavior is an outward manifestation of our Brand Values.

## Brand Voice

Our Voice isn't just the words we use, it's also our personality, our tone and the myriad ways we choose to visually represent Wisconsin Cheese across everything we do as well.

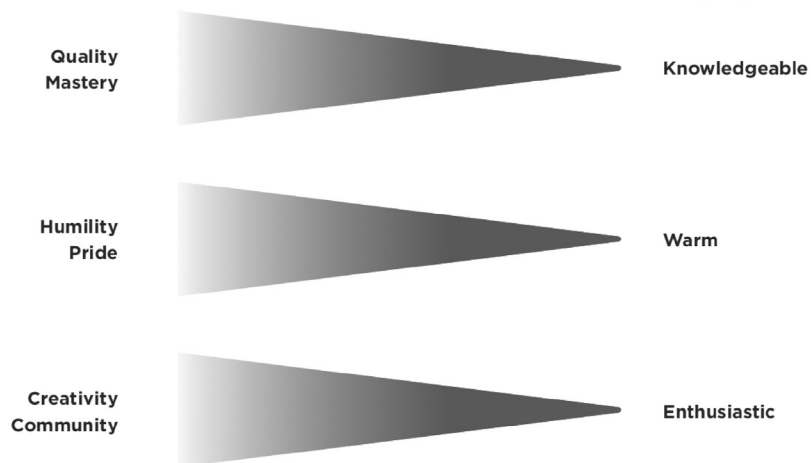


Figure 1

from the moment we stepped in the door. We also focused on giving team members a space to feel creative. In an environment that had formerly consisted of a lot of closed office doors, we put couches, monitors and other places to gather. We implemented new ways of approaching projects that encouraged breaking down silos and building up collaboration. There is a lot more to this part of the story that would be better suited for an human resources (HR) white paper, so I will merely state that our new CEO definitely believed in improving the culture and get back to building the brand.

## BEING BETTER STORYTELLERS

First of all, we needed to ask ourselves whom we were talking to, and our answer is Food Fanatics. For Food Fanatics, great food is not just a hobby but a lifestyle. It is also a sport, where they experience the thrill of the hunt, the excitement of being first to make discoveries and the social currency ‘winning social media (SM)’ gives them. Their obsession runs deep, and they love nothing more than spreading that gospel with their tribes. It is those conversations that define the winners and the losers in the speciality marketplace, and it is those very conversations we needed to start infiltrating if we were going to change the minds that matter most.

Food Fanatics tend to be women (61 per cent) and either Millennial experience junkies or affluent Boomers who have the discretionary dollar to follow their tastes wherever they lead them. They are found everywhere in the US, but tend to be clustered on the coasts. They are heavy consumers (and producers!) of food-related media (podcasts, TV series, Netflix documentaries, YouTube channels, foodstagram, Pinterest boards, culinary-themed Master Classes). Their missionary zeal for all that

media and all things food has increasingly accelerated the adoption of foodie culture values (curiosity, adventure, self-expression, originality, authenticity and connection) in America and throughout the world.<sup>2-5</sup>

Along with professionals like Mongers, Food Fanatics drive the speciality cheese marketplace — they tell their friends and families what great cheese to buy, where to shop and what to pay attention to. When they are not telling or explaining, they are giving suggestions, providing inspiration and validating the choices others are making.

To properly understand Food Fanatics, we need to look at those things that motivate their behaviours and ignite their passions — motivations we should be able to leverage in our marketing and communications:

1. The belief in the almost mystical power of great food to create memorable experiences
2. The obsessive hunt to discover the new, the novel and the most interesting foods
3. The centrality of cheese expertise to their personal and, in some cases, professional identities
4. Their appetite for a story and the understanding that the story elevates every part of the experience
5. The hunger to learn and progress on their personal cheese journeys and to use that knowledge to help others on their own journeys
6. The knowledge that great food is unique for creating meaningful connection and community

Research focus groups told us which notable talking points resonated most with our target consumers to elevate perceptions. It was clear that our central idea was to show that we are truly a

state obsessed with cheese and that we, in fact, dream in cheese. We can best tell that story through three pillars — quality, innovation and culture. The rich stories of our incredibly dedicated cheesemakers, our heritage of cheesemaking, the brands and products that people love (but did not realise were from Wisconsin), celebrating the cheese culture in our state, the people that love our cheese, institutions like the Center for Dairy Research at the University of Wisconsin that help to set our cheeses up for success, and the numerous awards our cheeses consistently win, all build upon those pillars. Most importantly, however, we wrapped everything we did in Wisconsin — *everything*. The following wheel was actually pinned up in our offices, so when we were writing press releases, developing social content, speaking with editors, writing web and blog copy, planning event signage and run-of-show scripts, we could always refer back and not only make sure we were driving one of these important messages, but also incorporating more of our story wherever possible. Driving these consistent messages through everything we did would be crucial to our success.



Figure 2 Wisconsin Cheese 'We Dream in Cheese' graph

Because we were, indeed, building a brand, we needed to have a logo to unite the various packages and brands of our state (remember there are more than 600 varieties, types and styles) in some easily recognisable way. If we convince consumers to love Wisconsin, they needed to have an easy way to find Wisconsin at retail. Let us think about those facts from the first section — we win more awards than anyone, so it made sense that our logo would look like an award of some sort. We have been making cheese since before we were a state, so it also made sense that it had to look a little nostalgic — as though it had been around for ages — and that we are a state that is completely obsessed with cheese, so certainly an element of pride should be included. Introducing the Proudly Wisconsin Cheese badge, which is now on 98 per cent of the cheeses made in Wisconsin to make them easily identifiable as coming from Wisconsin.

We also took a look at all our digital properties. Our website was cold and uninspiring with an overwhelming amount of content, making it confusing for users to find the information they were looking for. In addition, there was a lack of brand mentions, inconsistent photography and a lot of disjointed recipes of varying standards. It needed a total overhaul.

We focused on attracting and inspiring cheese lovers with modern lifestyle and entertaining and educational content. To accomplish this, we conducted a



Figure 3 Wisconsin Cheese Logo

large-scale photo shoot to ensure consistent photography throughout. We eliminated recipes that did not have great quality photography, were complicated or outdated.

We created a stunning flyover video to welcome consumers to the site, showcasing the wide variety of artisan cheeses made in Wisconsin, and wrote new copy that reflected our defined voice. We created new lifestyle and inspirational content on *The Cheese Life* blog<sup>6</sup> — telling our cheesemakers' stories, highlighting places in Wisconsin that pay homage to cheesemaking traditions and those that elevate our cheese to a new level, as well as providing innovative pairing tips. And we focused on recipes that used fewer ingredients and were inspirational; primarily those featured in our online cooking and entertaining magazine, *Grate. Pair. Share.*<sup>7</sup>

But none of this would mean anything if people could not find our content, so we invested in search engine optimisation (SEO) strategies, and our efforts surpassed our expectations. Out of 853 million results, we landed on page 1 on Google when searching the generic word cheese. We now have more than 280 keywords ranked on pages 1–3 on Google and 185 ranked images within Google. Our new blog content has resulted in more than 380 featured snippets in the US for Google, with an additional 153 in the UK and Canada, and 355 Google ask/answer suggestions in the US, UK and Canada. All of this helps drive traffic to WisconsinCheese.com.

The anthem is an important piece of our brand story. The anthem video<sup>8</sup> shows cheesemakers dressed in white walking over a hill on a farm in Wisconsin. Viewers note that each cheesemaker is carrying a wheel, and as they make it over, a large farm table awaits. Each cheesemaker

proudly places his or her cheese wheel on the table until there is a bountiful display of the most beautiful cheeses one could imagine. In celebration, all the cheesemakers throw their caps in the air and a banner is unfurled that shows the new badge and the words 'Proudly Wisconsin Cheese'. To date, our anthem has been viewed more than 27 million times.

Announcing ourselves as 'The State of Cheese' was not going to be enough. We had to show it, and we decided to do that with a big stunt — in fact, a world record-breaking stunt. It was the perfect way to showcase the fact that Wisconsin made so much more than cheddar. We created the World's Largest Cheeseboard, which had more than 4,000 pounds and hundreds of varieties of cheeses and which is now officially a Guinness World Record.<sup>9</sup> We did it in downtown Madison with 40,000 Wisconsinites in attendance. All the cheese was consumed — after all, this is Wisconsin!

Public relations definitely needed to be amped up so that consumers would see Wisconsin Cheese featured and recommended by a variety of sources they trusted. We spent a great deal of time building relationships with prominent editors and producers, constantly pitching story ideas, partnering with them to be a resource for every question they had about cheese of any kind. Whether it was cutting, storing, serving, making or anything related to cheese, we quickly became their go-to. We introduced them to cheesemakers, hosted cheese events in New York, brought many of them to Wisconsin to visit our creameries and farms and shipped them cheese on a regular basis. In the last three years, Wisconsin Cheese has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Food and Wine*, on *The Today Show*, the *Kelly Clarkson Show*, *Fox News*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*



Figure 4 Wisconsin Cheese stand

and many more. In addition to the big PR hits, we focused on working with local morning shows across the country so that their own hometown personalities could feature Wisconsin Cheeses, tips, recipes, cheeseboards and more along with some of their local favourite jam, produce, etc. Last year we were featured in important markets in all 50 states. Our total PR media value was over US\$40m.

### **BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Socially speaking, we looked like every other food brand. In fact, we looked so much like other food brands (with a series of cheeseboards and casserole photos) that it was difficult to differentiate us at all. We decided to make the cheeses, the makers and, most importantly, the fans the centre of attention. It was very clear that we needed to find our

superfans and connect well beyond the standard social media page. We needed to take our relationship to the next level to engage, equip and empower them to be super advocates for Wisconsin Cheese. We are not talking influencers in the way that most brands talk about influencers today. We were *not* reaching out to people who had huge followings and paying them to say something inauthentic about us. Authenticity is at the heart of our brand, so we could not take the easy way out. We had to build a real connection to grow real love. The sweet spot of a grassroots community is the everyday influencer, who goes above and beyond to share their knowledge, offer their opinions and talk about the brands and products they love.



Figure 5 Wisconsin Cheese social media



Figure 6 Wisconsin Cheese social media

### What is Cheeselandia?

Cheeselandia is our ambassador programme designed to get consumers all over the country to talk about (and taste) Wisconsin Cheese and share their passion with their friends.

### Why are we doing it?

According to Nielsen, consumers believe friends and family over all other forms of advertising.<sup>10</sup> To create a win for Wisconsin, we need to build positive word of mouth nationwide.



### How are we doing it?

We sought out real fans of Wisconsin Cheese from applicants in 49 out of 50 states and chose the biggest cheese lovers to be living messengers for our brand. We are educating them and asking them to host cheese parties for their friends and family. In addition, we are building an active community around this movement to incorporate cheese experts, editors, brands and so on.

While you will not find Cheeselandia on any map, the spirit of Cheeselandia is based on the tenacity, ingenuity and creativity of Wisconsin's cheese industry. From the farmers to the cheesemakers, from mongers to cheese lovers, Cheeselandia is a mythical manifestation of what makes Wisconsin wonderful, proving that the story of Wisconsin cheese is about more than a single state. Cheeselandia is a destination for cheese lovers, a state of mind and state of mouth that brings the warm hospitality of Wisconsin (and Wisconsin cheeses) to your home... wherever that may be. From the earliest days of childhood, cheese plays a part in the moments and memories that make up the tastiest bits of our lives. The farms and fields of Wisconsin are where those memories begin, a kingdom unto their own. This is a place where cheesemakers become storytellers, one cheese, rind, wheel, curd and nibble at a time. And although we may not all live in Wisconsin, a little wedge of Wisconsin lives inside us all.

We began the programme by looking for the biggest Wisconsin Cheese fans in the country. We went out to meet many of them when we hosted pop-up cheese events in areas across the country that over-indexed for Wisconsin Cheese sales and invited Cheeselandians as our VIPs. We created a travelling Cheeselandia State Fair to bring a little wedge of Wisconsin

wonderful into other states (a concept we launched at SXSW, in Austin, Texas, which ended up being the most popular lounge in SXSW history). The fair featured festive on-brand décor, a variety of performers from artists hanging from the ceiling pouring champagne, to close-up magicians and more. The star of every show, however, was our giant and beautifully decorated cheeseboard that featured hundreds of incredible cheeses from Wisconsin. According to our surveys, these events had a 9.98 net promoter score, meaning virtually everyone who came and said they would recommend Wisconsin cheeses to their friends. We also launched a series of in-home parties for the Cheeselandians who were going above and beyond in our community. We had over 300 parties across the country before everything shut down owing to the COVID-19 global pandemic. At that time, we sent out tiny, branded cheeseboards to all our Cheeselandians — perfect for quarantining — and we launched a series of virtual cheese parties. These free virtual events featured education from cheesemakers and professionals such as sommeliers and cheesemongers, as well as fun games. The virtual events became instant hits with the community and limited spots 'sold out' in just minutes (between 350 and 3,000 depending on the event). In spite of the many ways the world changed, Cheeselandia remained stronger than ever, with people all over the country united around one common theme — their shared love of Wisconsin Cheese!

### RESULTS

Currently, sales of Wisconsin speciality cheese are outpacing all others in the category. Our website broke a record this year with more than 1.7 million visitors and counting — our largest in the last

20 years. We have Cheeselandians (brand ambassadors) in all 50 states in the US. We achieved over US\$40m in media mentions in the last year, and our cheeses were featured not only in national publications and television but also on local shows in all fifty states. Our latest brand study (the same study I mentioned at the beginning of the paper but updated to the 2020 version) showed that unaided awareness of Wisconsin Cheese remains more than double that of other origins. Wisconsin Cheese maintains its lead in funnel performance among all origins tested, significantly outpacing France on awareness, consideration and purchase. Leading on brand impact, nearly six in ten consumers who are aware of Wisconsin are 'extremely likely' to buy the cheese strictly on the basis of origin. Awareness of varieties made in Wisconsin is up to 60 per cent<sup>11</sup>[6]. We moved from #96 on Google to page 1 for cheese. And we feel this is only the beginning.

## CONCLUSION

If you are in a similar position, the most important thing you can do is really get to know your brand/company/industry and then focus on your 'why'. Now is a fantastic time to redefine your brand positioning if you need to. For example, in our case it was about taking Wisconsin Cheese from 'mass' to 'class' and working to change perceptions. To have success, leadership must champion the change, and staff must live and breathe the brand transformation. We know that building a reputation for a new brand or product is much easier than changing a current reputation that is so strongly embedded in the minds of consumers. Groups looking to make change must tap into research

and insights to the guide brand renovation plan. In our case, we used focus groups to understand what messages resonated with our target consumers to elevate perceptions. In summary, brand renovations take time and must be looked at over multiple years to gauge success. In order to realise the most success, all aspects *must* centre on the objective of redefining the brand.

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