



# Top 30 Marketing Stunts as Media Sales Engines

## A Strategic Playbook for Modern Brand Growth

31 August 2026

A stunt is not an advertisement. It's an engine, built to hijack culture, disrupt standard attention patterns and convert earned reach directly into revenue.

We pulled together the 30 stunts that did this best, ranked by cultural penetration, earned media value, viral reach and proven commercial sales conversion. Six frameworks follow, so you can borrow the mechanic without betting the business.

### Special Case Study: Airlink Stadium Flyover, Cape Town (29 August 2026)

**Mechanic:** Context and live event hijack, plus visual subversion.

**Execution:** Airlink ran an ultra low flyover with dual Embraer E-Jets, clearing Cape Town Stadium by 12.5 to 14 metres before the Springboks versus All Blacks rugby match.

**Impact:** 40x+ earned media ROI through viral perspective footage and social debate over pilot skill versus safety rules.

**Framework fit:** Sits in Framework 1, Context Hijack, but carries high operational risk. Modern brands should mitigate this with CGI or 3D illusion rather than the real thing.

## 1. The Top 30 Stunts

|   | Brand & Stunt                         | Playbook / Blueprint                                                                                                                          | Impact (Reach & Sales)                                                                      | Risk            |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Red Bull: Stratosphere Jump (2012)    | <b>Extreme Feat:</b> Sponsored a live supersonic freefall testing human limits, anchored directly to product positioning (“gives you wings”). | 8M+ live YouTube viewers. \$500M+ earned media. 7% global sales lift (\$1.6B year on year). | High Risk       |
| 2 | Burger King: Whopper Detour (2018)    | <b>Competitor Hijack:</b> Geofenced McDonald's stores to offer a 1c Whopper unlocked only near competitor locations.                          | 1.5B impressions. 1.5M app downloads in 9 days. 14% foot traffic surge.                     | Safe & Scalable |
| 3 | IHOP / IHOb: Name Change Stunt (2018) | <b>Intentional Debate:</b> Temporarily flipped its logo to IHOb to force viral public debate over its new burger line.                        | 36B earned impressions. 4x surge in burger sales. 1.4M tweets in 48 hours.                  | Moderate Risk   |
| 4 | CeraVe: Michael Cera “Founder” (2024) | <b>Absurdist Rumor:</b> Seeded rumors via creators that actor Michael Cera founded the brand before a Super Bowl reveal.                      | 6B earned impressions. #1 social engagement brand. Doubled sales during launch.             | Safe & Scalable |

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|----|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 5  | Greggs: Vegan Sausage Roll (2019)            | <b>Cultural Friction:</b> Tapped into veganism versus traditionalist culture wars to provoke reaction driven press.           | \$1B market valuation hit. 13.5% revenue growth in 52 weeks. Viral celebrity debates.   | Safe & Scalable |
| 6  | SpaceX / Tesla: Roadster in Space (2018)     | <b>Context Placement:</b> Placed a consumer electric sports car in deep space aboard a Falcon Heavy rocket.                   | 100M+ live views. Multi billion PR value. Permanent elevation of Tesla brand authority. | Moderate Risk   |
| 7  | McDonald's: Grimace Shake Meme (2023)        | <b>User Horror Trend:</b> Let TikTok users turn a character shake launch into a viral "found footage horror" trend.           | 3B+ TikTok views. 10.3% U.S. same store sales growth (multi year high).                 | Safe & Scalable |
| 8  | Payless: Palessi Luxury Store (2018)         | <b>High Low Experiment:</b> Sold \$20 budget shoes inside a fake Italian luxury boutique at \$600+ price tags.                | 1.8B impressions. Shifted national quality perception. Massive earned media.            | Safe & Scalable |
| 9  | ALS Association: Ice Bucket Challenge (2014) | <b>Peer to Peer Chain:</b> Simple physical challenge plus peer tagging plus a clear charitable donation incentive.            | 17M+ user videos. \$115M raised in 8 weeks. 3,500% year on year fundraising surge.      | Safe & Scalable |
| 10 | Taco Bell: Liberty Bell Purchase (1996)      | <b>April Fools Subversion:</b> Full page ad claiming the brand bought the national monument, 'The Taco Liberty Bell'.         | Hundreds of front page national features. \$50M+ press value. Immediate sales lift.     | Moderate Risk   |
| 11 | Blair Witch Project: Missing Flyers (1999)   | <b>Found Footage Realism:</b> Marketed a fiction film as a true missing persons case via physical flyers and forums.          | Made \$248M on a \$60K budget. Birthed modern viral film marketing.                     | Safe & Scalable |
| 12 | Spotify: Spotify Wrapped (Annual)            | <b>Data Vanity:</b> Personalizes usage data into beautiful, shareable infographics tailored for flex culture.                 | Millions of user posts. Drives annual December app download records.                    | Safe & Scalable |
| 13 | Duolingo: Unhinged Mascot (2021-Present)     | <b>Mascot Brand Voice:</b> Relinquished corporate polish for an unhinged, aggressive mascot persona on TikTok.                | 30%+ year on year subscriber growth. Turned an education app into a pop culture icon.   | Moderate Risk   |
| 14 | WestJet: Christmas Miracle (2013)            | <b>Real Time Surprise:</b> Delivered personalized Christmas gifts to passengers on arrival via live airport monitor requests. | 50M+ views. 86% increase in international bookings over the holidays.                   | Safe & Scalable |
| 15 | Amazon Prime Video: 1950s Pricing (2019)     | <b>Time Machine Discount:</b> Cut gasoline to 30c a gallon and film tickets to 50c to promote 'Mrs. Maisel'.                  | 600%+ surge in local trial sign ups. Hours long, press worthy traffic queues.           | Moderate Risk   |
| 16 | Tubi: Super Bowl Glitch (2023)               | <b>System Hijack:</b> A 10 second Super Bowl ad simulating a viewer accidentally switching off the game screen.               | Viral scare during a live game. Highest engagement rate of Super Bowl LVII.             | Safe & Scalable |
| 17 | Barbie / Mattel: Pink World Hijack (2023)    | <b>Color Monopolization:</b> Co branded with hundreds of products to saturate physical and digital channels in pink.          | \$1.4B box office. Global retail sell out. Permanent brand repositioning.               | Safe & Scalable |
| 18 | Uber: UberIceCream / Puppies (2014)          | <b>On Demand Twist:</b> Used fleet logistics to deliver ice cream and rescue puppies on demand via the app.                   | Massive earned PR. Millions of social tags. Accelerated app adoption worldwide.         | Safe & Scalable |

|    | Brand & Stunt                               | Playbook / Blueprint                                                                                                           | Impact (Reach & Sales)                                                              | Risk            |
|----|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 19 | KFC: 'FCK' Shortage Ad (2018)               | <b>Self Deprecating Apology:</b> Rearranged the logo to 'FCK' in full page print ads during an operational chicken shortage.   | Averted customer churn. Globally recognized as the gold standard in crisis PR.      | Safe & Scalable |
| 20 | WeTransfer: Unclickable Billboard (2012)    | <b>Anti Ad Copywriting:</b> Bought outdoor ads stating transparent truths that challenged digital clutter.                     | 400% site traffic surge. Established tech authority among creators.                 | Safe & Scalable |
| 21 | Cards Against Humanity: Black Friday (2015) | <b>Anti Consumer Irony:</b> Sold actual dirt, effectively nothing, for \$5 on Black Friday to critique the retail craze.       | Raised \$100K+ selling literal dirt. Drove record holiday game sales.               | Moderate Risk   |
| 22 | Airbnb: Night At... Iconic Stays (2016+)    | <b>Unobtainable Stays:</b> Converted the Louvre, Shrek's Swamp and the Barbie Mansion into bookable stays.                     | Billions of earned impressions per drop. Sustained top of funnel traffic.           | Safe & Scalable |
| 23 | Liquid Death: Beer Can Water (2021)         | <b>Packaging Subversion:</b> Packaged plain water in tallboy beer cans with a heavy metal aesthetic.                           | Built a \$1B+ valuation using zero traditional water media spend.                   | Safe & Scalable |
| 24 | Carlsberg: Beer Dispensing Poster (2015)    | <b>Utility Billboard:</b> Fitted an outdoor poster with a functional draft beer tap ('probably the best poster in the world'). | 60M+ social views. Thousands of free pours. Global earned media coverage.           | Safe & Scalable |
| 25 | Fenty Beauty: 40 Shade Drop (2017)          | <b>Inclusivity Disruption:</b> Launched 40 foundation shades, directly calling out competitor market neglect.                  | \$100M sales in 40 days. Created the ongoing industry 'Fenty Effect'.               | Safe & Scalable |
| 26 | Domino's: Paving for Pizza (2018)           | <b>Civic Action:</b> Paid local city councils to fill potholes and protect delivered pizzas from damage.                       | 35B earned impressions. High municipal goodwill. Steady sales surge.                | Safe & Scalable |
| 27 | Misereor: Social Swipe Billboard (2014)     | <b>Frictionless Tech:</b> Created digital billboards where credit card swipes physically sliced open donor ropes.              | Increased donor conversion by 300%+. Set a global charity tech benchmark.           | Safe & Scalable |
| 28 | Match.com: Satan Meets 2020 (2020)          | <b>Cultural Relatability:</b> A humorous narrative depicting Satan finding love with the year 2020.                            | 100M+ views. Highest brand affinity spike in the company's history.                 | Safe & Scalable |
| 29 | CarMax: Accord Offer Hijack (2017)          | <b>UGC Hijack:</b> Responded to a fan's viral video selling a 1996 Accord with a real \$20K corporate offer.                   | Massive customer goodwill. Proved an agile, social first brand culture.             | Safe & Scalable |
| 30 | Oatly: Super Bowl Keyboard (2021)           | <b>Anti CEO Stunt:</b> Placed the CEO in an oat field singing a deliberately low budget, awkward song.                         | #1 talked about ads during the Super Bowl. Oat milk sales jumped 182% year on year. | Safe & Scalable |

## 2. Six Strategic Frameworks

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Every stunt above maps to one of six repeatable frameworks. Match your brand's risk appetite and budget to the framework, not the other way around.

### Framework 1: Competitor & Context Hijack (Digital 8.5/10)

- **Target brands:** Challenger brands, D2C, mobile apps, aggressive B2C players.
- **Budget & expected ROI:** \$50K to \$250K. 10x to 30x ROI, driven by immediate trial and conversion.
- **Risk & mitigation:** High legal risk (trademark, cease and desist). Keep messaging light and humorous. Pre clear geofencing borders and prepare a lighthearted 'Plan B' statement to turn a legal threat into Part 2 of the campaign.

### Framework 2: Absurdist Rumor & Subversion Play (Digital 10/10)

- **Target brands:** CPG, lifestyle, e-commerce, brands with underdog personality.
- **Budget & expected ROI:** \$20K to \$150K. Moderate to high ROI through unpaid earned impressions and retail sell through.
- **Risk & mitigation:** Risk of cringe or confusion. Seed content organically through micro creators and Reddit rather than corporate accounts. Hold a strict 48 to 72 hour reveal timeline.

### Framework 3: Experiential & High-Low Experiment

- **Target brands:** Retailers, hospitality, travel, local services.
- **Budget & expected ROI:** \$100K to \$500K. Long term brand equity and conversion lift over 6 to 12 months.
- **Risk & mitigation:** Operational bottlenecks and safety hazards. Use unscripted real consumers, secure media releases, and partner with local councils on physical builds.

### Framework 4: Outrage, Debate & Name-Change Play (Digital 7/10)

- **Target brands:** Legacy brands needing repositioning, fast food, gaming, casual dining.
- **Budget & expected ROI:** \$10K to \$100K. High top of funnel search volume and immediate trial lift.
- **Risk & mitigation:** Brand equity damage or customer alienation. Keep the debate strictly to low stakes topics, recipes, names, logos. Never political or social issues.

### Framework 5: Data Vanity & Peer Engine (Digital 10/10)

- **Target brands:** SaaS, mobile platforms, non profits, youth oriented apps.
- **Budget & expected ROI:** \$15K to \$200K. The highest organic ROI, powered by free user generated content.
- **Risk & mitigation:** Low initial viral uptake. Format visual outputs for one click 9:16 vertical sharing and seed initial participation with paid micro influencers.

## Framework 6: Extreme Stunt Feats

- **Target brands:** Global enterprises, automotive, energy drinks, aerospace.
- **Budget & expected ROI:** \$2M to \$50M+. Massive global earned media and permanent category authority.
- **Risk & mitigation:** Extreme physical and financial failure risk. Require aerospace grade redundant safety, global insurance, and strict backup protocols.

## 3. Modern Digital Compatibility

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How each framework performs on today's platforms, ranked out of 10.

- **Digital Champions, 10/10:** Data Vanity and Absurdist Subversion. Built for short form video, comment section engagement and creator co-creation.
- **The Real-Time Play, 8.5/10:** Competitor Hijack. Relies on agile social listening to piggyback trending events within one to two hours.
- **The Hybrid Model, 7/10:** Outrage and Debate. High volume engagement on X and TikTok, but suffers rapid fatigue if the reveal is delayed.
- **Offline Legacy Models, 3 to 4/10:** Experiential pop ups and extreme feats. Capital intensive with low direct digital conversion unless filmed as high production short video.

## 4. Why We Excluded the Branson Playbook

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Richard Branson's Virgin stunts are the obvious comparison. We left them out on purpose.

- **Single point of failure:** Virgin stunts relied on Branson personally risking his safety, ballooning, tanks, jumping off towers. Modern corporations can't rely on executive stuntmanship.
- **Low commercial conversion:** The headlines were real, the sales often weren't. Virgin Cola never touched Coke. Virgin Brides closed.
- **Pre-digital mechanics:** Built for front page newspaper photos, not algorithmic, participation driven virality.

## 5. Execution Checklist Before You Launch

Five checks, every time, before a stunt goes live.

| Checkpoint         | Action                                                                                  | Risk Mitigated                   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Friction Audit  | Centre the debate on low stakes brand elements, never protected social identities.      | Brand backlash or cancellation   |
| 2. Legal Clearance | Pre-vet geofencing and IP boundaries. Prepare a lighthearted 'Plan B' statement.        | Cease and desist injunctions     |
| 3. Creator Seeding | Distribute initial clues through third party creators, not corporate channels.          | Inauthentic corporate perception |
| 4. Conversion Loop | Embed a direct conversion mechanism, an app promo code or limited drop link, in all PR. | Wasted awareness without sales   |
| 5. 72-Hour Reveal  | Cap the mystery duration to prevent consumer fatigue and hold momentum.                 | Public boredom or confusion      |

*A note on the numbers: figures in this playbook are compiled from public reporting on each campaign. Verify before quoting externally or including in client facing material.*