

Levi Roots: still music to the ears of its branded partners

From Dragons' Den to a £30m food and drink empire, Levi Roots' Reggae Reggae brand keeps on expanding. But is it overextending itself? **Vince Bamford** reports

It's been four years since Levi Roots first told consumers to 'put some music in your food' – and the explosive growth of his Reggae Reggae brand clearly shows it hit the right note.

Few food brands come close to matching the ubiquity of Reggae Reggae. From its beginnings as a jerk sauce, the brand has expanded into a wide range of categories, with Roots' dreadlocked silhouette and rasta colours adorning everything from ketchups to cooking sauces, Birds Eye burgers to crisps, ready meals and soft drinks.

Last week brought news of yet another extension – a range of chilled pasties made by Ginsters.

The Grocer's archives contain many stories of brands that have failed in far less ambitious aims. So what has Reggae Reggae got that is so in tune with today's shoppers – and, with extensions continuing to appear, just how far can the brand stretch?

Premier Foods learned the hard way earlier this year that even apparently safe brand extensions can fall flat. Its attempt to take the Loyd Grossman name into chilled pizzas saw the lines fail to sell unless on promotion. At the time, branding experts also said the pizzas failed to compete with premium own-label and branded offerings already on shelf.

Timing is crucial for any brand extension, says James Littlewood, consultant at branding expert The Value Engineers, who suggests Tesco might not have been able to move into banking if it had tried it 20 years ago. "Only through gradual proliferation across adjacent categories has the brand acquired sufficient credibility to enter retail banking," he says.

And timing has been on Roots' side, says Mintel analyst Amy



The Reggae Reggae brand is now extending into Ginsters pasties – but is this a brand stretch too far?

Lloyd. "Reggae Reggae is tapping into the trends of provenance, authenticity and personality."

Roots' personality and story – which won over the entrepreneurs and viewers of Dragons' Den in 2007 – has certainly played a role in the success of Reggae Reggae. But charm can only get a brand so far. A key reason it is now worth more than £30m is because it has allowed the likes of Birds Eye, Ginsters and Vimto to tap into a market they might not reach on their own. "It offers customers a taste of the Caribbean – spicy, adventurous food that is not the natural territory for many of the businesses Roots is working with," suggests Richard Buchanan of brand agency The Clearing.

Roots has also been careful in the type of products he has associ-

ated with the brand, adds Littlewood. "There has been a logical progression from the sauce product, to ready-prepared meals featuring the sauce, through products containing the sauce as a flavour, finally to soft drinks," he says, adding that the flavours of the drinks – such as Papaya 'n' Lime and Blood Orange 'n' Pomegranate – retain the brand's strong Caribbean cues.

As a result, there's little to sug-

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gest the brand is stretching itself too far, say industry observers. In fact, Littlewood believes it could even extend beyond its Caribbean roots. "A brand may stretch as far as its core values allow," he says. "The slogan 'Put music in your food' can be transplanted to a number of food categories and it will be interesting to see whether Reggae Reggae tries to put music into other forms of world cuisine."

Buchanan suggests Roots' one slightly off-key move is the Ginsters pasties. "This may be a stretch too far. I can understand spicy burgers and even the soft drinks but I just don't associate the Caribbean with pasties – Jamaican patties, yes, but not pasties."

But, given that Sainsbury's and takeaway chain West Cornwall Pasty Co have both been selling their own Reggae Reggae-branded pasties for some time, it seems likely this too will strike a chord with shoppers.