

Rumborak Times

MURDERing THE RULES

How a Mockup Joke Became a \$1.4B Water Empire

The Audacious American Rise and British Retreat of Liquid Death

By Editorial Team

In our premier issue, we explored the mechanics of **Catalytic Marketing** – the strategy of replacing relentless ad volume with single, high leverage moments that force an entire market to react. But what happens when you apply this playbook to the most boring commodity on the planet?

You get Liquid Death.

In 2008, former punk rock guitarist and ad creative Mike Cessario was standing backstage at the Warped Tour when he noticed something bizarre: touring rock musicians were secretly pouring tap water into empty Monster Energy cans. They couldn't perform two hour sets in scorching summer heat chugging sugary energy drinks, but they also couldn't be seen holding a fragile plastic water bottle on stage either.

That moment sparked a wild question: *Why is bold, funny, head turning branding reserved strictly for junk food and beer, while healthy products are forced to look like sterile medical supplies?*

To break out of standard corporate autopilot, Cessario forced his mind through a radical exercise: 'What is the dumbest possible idea we could do?' The answer: Plunk pure mountain water in a heavy metal tallboy beer can, wrap it in skulls, and name it Liquid Death.

Before manufacturing a single physical can, Cessario created a 3D digital mockup, filmed a wild commercial for just \$1,500, and spent \$2,000 on Facebook ads. Within four months, the video hit 3 million views and accumulated 80,000 followers. **Convenience store owners and distributors began frantically calling to order pallets of a product that didn't even exist yet.**

Once physical cans were sourced from a spring in Frankenmarkt, Austria, Liquid Death's commercial growth accelerated at a rate rarely seen in consumer packaged goods (Supercharging Growth in the American CPG market):

- **2019:** \$2.8 Million (Direct-to-Consumer & Amazon launch)
- **2020:** \$10.0 Million (Nationwide launch in Whole Foods)
- **2021:** \$45.0 Million (7-Eleven national convenience rollout)
- **2022:** \$130.0 Million (Walmart, Target, and Live Nation venues)
- **2024:** \$263.0 Million in retail sales (Valuation: \$1.4 Billion)

When physical production launched, Liquid Death refused to run standard corporate ads. Instead, they built an in house comedy writers' room packed with former storytellers from 'The Onion' and stand up comedians, creating chaotic catalytic moments that set the internet on fire.

Some radical PR campaigns include:

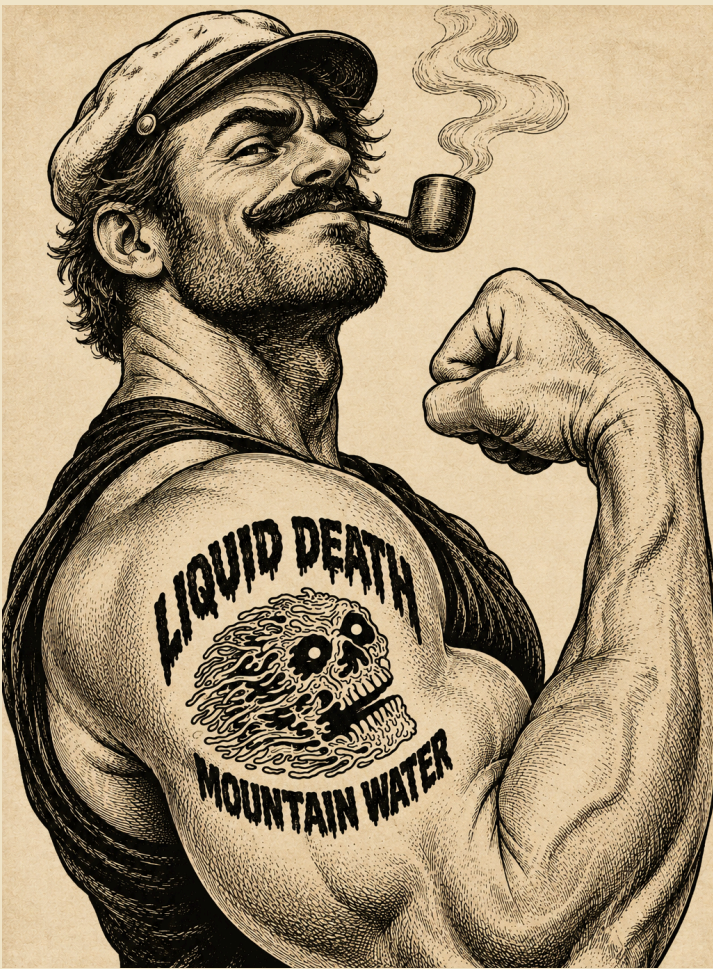
- **Tony Hawk's Blood Skateboards:** They drew real blood from Tony Hawk, mixed it into deck paint for 100 limited edition skateboards (\$500 each), and sold out in 20 minutes flat.
- **The Fighter Jet Giveaway:** Parodying Pepsi's notorious 1990s Harrier Jet lawsuit, Liquid Death actually bought and gave away an operational, FAA-certified L-39 Albatros fighter jet, instantly doubling website traffic.
- **Corpsepaint with E.L.F. Cosmetics:** They teamed up with pastel makeup brand E.L.F. to launch heavy metal 'Corpsepaint' makeup kits, generating massive mainstream headlines.

After conquering North America and reaching an eye watering \$1.4 billion valuation, Liquid Death crossed the Atlantic in 2023 only to quietly pull out of the UK market less than two years later.

What happened? First, moving production exclusively to/from the US meant shipping heavy cans of water back across the ocean, which destroyed their margins. Second, because the tallboys look so much like craft beer, supermarket clerks in major UK chains like Tesco repeatedly stocked them in the alcohol aisles, leaving hydrated shoppers unable to find them. Finally, launching at £1.50 per can in a UK where tap water is great to drink and cost of living crisis felt out of touch to British consumers, who mocked their heavy metal festival sponsorships as 'try hard' corporate noise.

Despite the European bump in the road, Liquid Death built an almost religious fan cult that traditional corporate brands would kill for:

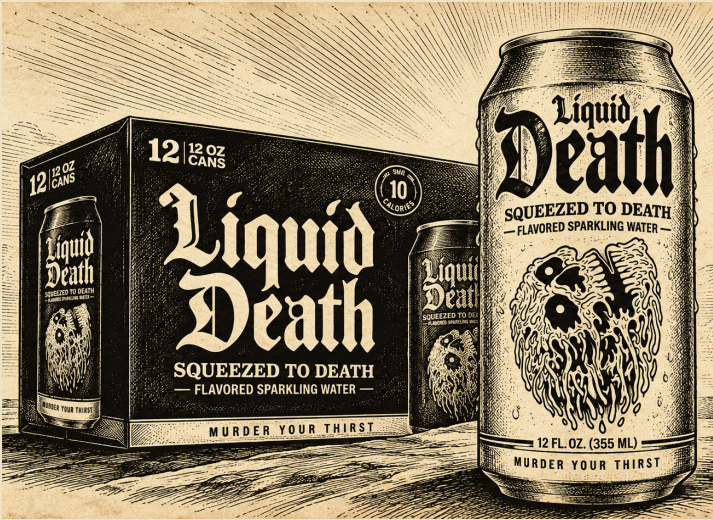
- **Kids & Parents:** Parents constantly message the brand in relief. Nine year olds beg for Liquid Death instead of soda because holding a black skull laden tallboy makes them feel like they are drinking something rebellious and 'forbidden' – yet it's pure mountain water!



- **Construction Workers at 7-Eleven:** Blue collar workers grabbing morning drinks began swapping out their second energy drink for a Liquid Death. The tallboy can looks tough on the job site, giving them cool points without the caffeine crash.
- **300+ Fan Tattoos:** Over 300 die hard fans have permanently tattooed the Liquid Death logo or cans onto their bodies – including full head, neck, and throat tattoos, surpassing even Harley Davidson in fan density!
- **Death to Plastic:** Beyond the jokes lies a serious environmental mission. Aluminum cans are infinitely recyclable, whereas plastic recycling is largely an economic myth where most plastic ends up in landfills. Liquid Death made environmental advocacy cool, edgy, and accessible.

Liquid Death teaches us the ultimate lesson of **Catalytic Marketing**: when you stop playing it safe and unleash bold, authentic enthusiasm, you don't just win customers – you build an army of advocates and construct a billion dollar empire from thin air.

However, its UK retreat reminds us that marketing is only one leg of the business stool. While logistics, retail execution, and local cultural nuances must always be respected, the courage to be delightfully, unapologetically different is what turns an ordinary commodity into an unforgettable legend.



The Rumborak Insight: Hype ignites the room, but only unforgiving margins, physical distribution muscle, and genuine cultural truth determine whether you build a kingdom or just a viral ghost.