Case Study

REDISCOVERING PURPOSE: HOW CHIPOTLE BECAME VISIBLE, RELEVANT AND LOVED

Learn the marketing strategy Chipotle deployed after a series of food crises threatened its brand reputation and loyal customer base. It introduces the decisions and rationale of a newly installed marketing team charged with restoring the company's positive trajectory, focusing on marketing-specific aspects of a strategic plan. The case tackles the challenge of reengaging customers through brand purpose by reenergizing the tenets upon which the Chipotle brand was originally built: cultivating a better world through access to real food. Using the 4P's as a framework, we analyze efforts to make the brand visible, relevant and loved, considering strategy implementation alongside results. This research advances the brand management discourse by detailing the importance of consistent and synergistic marketing activation in purpose-driven marketing.

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SITUATION ANALYSIS

Chipotle Mexican Grill opened its first restaurant in 1993, pioneering a new fast-casual concept rooted in "real" food – wholesome ingredients without artificial colors, flavors, or preservatives (see Exhibit 1). The concept caught fire, and Chipotle opened new restaurants across the United States. Chipotle's market capitalization reached a new high of $23.1B in July 2015, and the company's prospects never looked brighter. Later in 2015, after nearly two decades of massive growth, Chipotle faced a series of food crises that threatened the brand's reputation and loyal customer base. By the end of 2017, its market capitalization had fallen below $8B. As the chain was beginning to put these events in the rear-view mirror, a new round of food poisoning outbreaks made national headlines in 2018, leading to over 1,100 reported illnesses. The brand faced a crucial crossroads.

Exhibit 1: The first Chipotle restaurant in Denver, CO

Chipotle reorganized the C-suite and welcomed a new executive team in 2018 to restore the company's positive trajectory. The team established five strategic pillars:

- Run Great Restaurants
- World Class Leadership
- Make the Brand Visible, Relevant, and Loved
- Amplify Technology and Innovation
- Expand Access and Convenience

The new leadership team turned to Chris Brandt, a veteran food executive, to lead the marketing pillar of the plan: make the brand visible, relevant, and loved. As the new Chief Brand Officer (CBO), Brandt sought to understand the reputational consequences of the food crisis events as the first step to restoring the brand. As he looked back to its founding in 1993, Brandt discovered that Chipotle was built around the purpose to "Cultivate a Better World" through offering increased access to real food – a space between fast food and casual restaurants. The importance of real traced to the founder's vision: unprocessed, responsibly raised options, made fresh every day with classic culinary techniques. The emphasis on real gave Chipotle a differentiated and strong sense of purpose that helped build the brand.

Brandt discovered these were not just empty statements. He uncovered the abundant use of fresh, local produce; specific company guidelines for ingredients; and strict adherence to industry-leading standards with animal welfare. Can openers and freezers – fast-food restaurant staples – were noticeably absent in Chipotle's kitchens because they compromised freshness. Brandt noted, "I was always a big Chipotle fan before, but I didn't realize the extent of the commitment to real food. Unlike most other restaurant concepts in the space that just reheat food, Chipotle is a real restaurant, and I was blown away by how much every restaurant looks like a farmer's market in the morning during prep for the day." But as Brandt walked the company headquarters in Newport Beach, California, and toured restaurants across the country, he came to a striking conclusion: this ethos around real food had become less salient to company employees, and the brand had lost its confidence around its sense of purpose.

Brandt's conclusion was supported by market research. In an effort to reestablish the brand's value among consumers, he needed to find out where Chipotle lost its way and how its commitment to cultivating a better world had degraded over time. As his team examined the marketing tactics intended to fuel Chipotle's growth, it became apparent that the brand was overly focused on short-term sales. Coupons, discounts, free food, and sales-oriented promotions dominated the marketing mix spend. The brand was spending heavily on short-term marketing tactics without increasing transactions. Furthermore, instead of talking about the positives of Chipotle, the brand had spent a lot of time drawing attention to the shortcomings of others and the food system in general. Even more troubling was that the company was not investing at all in the brand's core value proposition – its point of difference in the marketplace. Instead, the brand was focused exclusively on short-term profits by attracting consumers through pricing tactics.

The marketing team came to a harrowing conclusion: the brand crisis was one of its own making; Chipotle had lost focus and lost its way. Chasing growth, the team inadvertently lost track of their "why", the firm's North Star. In an increasingly crowded competitive field, this dereliction of purpose left Chipotle without the point of differentiation that helped establish it as a marketplace force. As the marketing team looked internally, they saw a company culture that was no longer purpose-driven. The food crises were a symptom of a much greater problem and provided an impetus to reignite the brand.

CHALLENGE

Embedded in the company's DNA since its founding, Brandt and the rest of the Chipotle team found themselves in a position where they did not need to define their purpose, but rather, remind themselves and their customers of it. Brandt believed that love lost could be regained; he was convinced that reengaging customers on why they loved Chipotle could reenergize the brand. In order to do so, the team needed to revisit its history, looking back to go forward. They were challenged with charting a path that would permit them to highlight their established commitment to cultivating a better world, reinserting it into their business philosophy in general and marketing communications, in particular.

GOALS

Aligning to the strategic priorities established by the new leadership group, the marketing team was tasked with connecting this resurrection of purpose to marketing efforts with the goal of making the brand visible, relevant, and loved; they needed to reinvigorate the "why" and chart the "how". Specifically focused on appealing to Gen Z and Millennials, they set about engaging with the target audience by spotlighting the brand's purpose and its real food. The plan needed to be comprehensive and focus on rebuilding brand equity in a dynamic and highly competitive landscape.

COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE [1]

Chipotle operates in the very competitive quick service restaurant (QSR) sector. QSRs offer limited or no table service, standardized menus, and high-throughput operations that prioritize fast ordering, production and pickup via counter, drive-thru, takeout, and delivery. The sector is growing quickly, expanding with additions of healthy, low-calorie concepts and options. 2024 revenue exceeded $413B and is expected to approach $445 by 2030. Burgers dominate the sector (40.9%), with global offerings, dominated by Mexican and Asian options (12.7%) coming in a distant second. Increases in consumer spending and growth in urban populations are positive drivers for the sector, while higher menu prices and shifting consumer preferences toward healthier options (especially among Millennials[2]) are negative drivers. Within the segment, fast-casual restaurants like Cava and Sweetgreen are on the rise, offering customizable, healthier options; Chipotle is an industry rising star, commanding 3% of the overall market (see Appendix A for a non-exhaustive competitive landscape in 2025). To remain competitive in this environment, restaurants must be vigilant, proactive, and innovative.

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[1] (2025, May). Fast Food Restaurants in the US. 72221A. Retrieved from IBISWorld database

[2] Plunkett, Jack. Plunkett's Food Industry Almanac 2020: Food Industry Market Research, Statistics, Trends and Leading Companies. Plunkett Research, 2020

IMPLEMENTATION/ACTIVATION

Brandt and the marketing team set about infusing Chipotle's purpose into its marketing strategy in an effort to become more visible, relevant, and loved. They realized that in order to resonate with their target market, Gen Z and millennials, they needed to highlight their "why", focusing on authenticity and realness. This mandate dovetailed nicely with their historic focus on increasing access to real food, paving the way for them to execute the "how" through incorporating the concepts into their 4 P's: product, promotion, price, and place (see Appendix B for a snapshot of the activation timeline from 2017 to 2022).

Product

Prior to the leadership transition, Chipotle experienced various degrees of success in its attempt to be recognized as a leader in increasing access to real food. Brandt and team were intent on being consistently recognized as a provider of high-quality, authentic food. Its approach to queso serves as a good example of this effort. Previously perceived as a mediocre and gritty imitation of the authentic dish, the team relaunched a reformulated Queso Blanco in February 2020 (see Exhibit 2). The new recipe developed a passionate following and now generates $400 million in revenue annually.

In addition to revisiting menu staples, the team attempted to remain relevant in the eyes of their target market by introducing two to three new items a year to battle menu fatigue. Introducing new items required that they attend to both perceptions of ingredients and customer experience when ordering the items; the team was "selective about new products being true to the operational nature of Chipotle and its emphasis on freshness."

Exhibit 2: Chipotle Launches Queso Blanco in 2020

Attention to ingredients resulted in a supply chain audit, with the goal to ensure the best ingredients for customers and for the planet. When the team realized that only 30% of the cilantro it sourced was organic due to inventory limitations, they developed a program that would assist farmers in converting their crops from conventional to organic to increase this percentage. As a result, the company now spends approximately $500 million more dollars a year to procure their responsibly raised ingredients vs conventionally raised alternatives. Chipotle invests in better ingredients because they believe that *"there is a direct connection between food is raised and how it tastes"*—a tenet of the brand they call *Food With Integrity*.

For Chipotle, a menu innovation must not only be responsibly sourced and taste delicious, but it must be seamlessly executable for crew members. In late 2022, TikTok creator Alexis Frost reviewed a Chipotle Steak Quesadilla with Fajita Veggies, an unlisted combination of menu items, dubbing it a perfect "10" for her 2.4 million followers (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3: Fajita Quesadilla

Exhibit 4: Chipotle "Behind the Foil"

Despite the excitement around the viral "hack," it posed a challenge for Chipotle restaurant employees because it was not an official menu item on the brand's digital ordering channels. Understanding the urgency from its fans, Chipotle quickly mobilized a cross-functional partnership with its culinary, digital product, operations, and marketing teams to add the Fajita Quesadilla to digital menus and train 100,000+ employees across 3,300+ restaurants in less than three months, record time for a new menu item launch. In doing so, the brand was able to capitalize on an opportunity to innovate, while maintaining the integrity of their product offering.

Promotion

As the marketing team sought to reignite brand purpose, they wanted to emphasize the brand's foundation – real ingredients. Brandt said, "If we show people all the care that goes into our morning prep, they will love it!" and the idea for a new campaign was born. They called in an advertising agency, contracted an award-winning director, Errol Morris, and sent a casting call to Chipotle employees. Morris filmed employees in restaurants and created documentary-style ads. The marketing team reallocated $25M in promotional spend (coupons, discounts, and giveaways) toward advertising investment in 2018 and pushed even more funds out of couponing and into media in 2019. The "Behind the Foil" campaign debuted in early 2019 with immediate impact (see Exhibit 4). By the end of the first quarter, revenue increased 13.9%, and digital purchases soared to a 100% year-over-year gain. The turnaround was underway.

To make the brand more visible, Chipotle significantly increased its overall advertising investment. The brand team considered how and where they wanted to appear with their target demographic. Chipotle targeted ad placements in sporting events because they amass the highest live viewership of any category, appearing in the National Hockey League (NHL) playoffs, March Madness, and later Formula 1. The brand also started showing up in unconventional places that allowed them to share its real messaging. One of these places was the National Spelling Bee (see Exhibit 5). Chipotle hired a comedian and filmed people spelling Chipotle's real ingredients (e.g., corn, avocado, and jalapeno) juxtaposed with competitors' artificial ingredients (e.g., dimethylpolysiloxane). These marketing promotions allowed the brand to showcase its real essence with new audiences in a fun, lighthearted way.

To make the brand more relevant, Chipotle embraced Snapchat and TikTok before its competitors. Chipotle initiated one of the first branded challenges on TikTok and became the first restaurant brand to reach 1 million followers on the platform. As the company became culturally relevant again, the marketing team fielded numerous requests for collaborations. Adhering to their commitment to real, Chipotle turned down opportunities to partner with social media influencers who hadn't already shown brand love organically; the brand wanted real advocates in a variety of cultural spaces. Chipotle was also one of the first brands to enter the gaming world. The brand partnered with Fortnite gamers to produce branded content with record completion rates and created entirely new experiences on Roblox that have amassed nearly 26 million visitors to date (see Exhibit 6). Chipotle maintains its commitment to relevance by continuously evaluating how real intersects with culture and finding unique moments that connect with the brand.

Exhibit 5: Chipotle at the 2019 Scripps National Spelling Bee

Exhibit 6: Chipotle on Roblox

The “Behind the Foil” campaign laid the foundation to restore Chipotle’s brand essence around real. Since Chipotle sourced more local produce than any other restaurant brand, the marketing team wanted to highlight the real challenges facing the industry as a complement to their marketing communications about real ingredients. Brandt remarked, “We started telling the stories of our farmers. We made a commitment [to them] because farming is in trouble.” Chipotle sponsored the first philanthropic float in Rose Bowl Parade history, with proceeds going to local farmers. The brand also took the farming message to the world’s biggest stage, Super Bowl LV, with the ad, “Can a Burrito Change the World?” and a $5M commitment to farmers and ranchers. The Super Bowl ad was the brand's first, affirming its goal of making the brand visible. Chipotle followed this highly acclaimed ad with a short film, “A Future Begins,” reinforcing the farming industry’s challenges. The film was designed as a sequel to a 2011 film called “Back to the Start” and brought Chipotle’s purpose and marketing full circle.

Price

During their initial surveying of the brand’s landscape, the newly seated marketing team recognized that in order to bring customers through the door and drive sales, Chipotle had become heavily reliant upon discounts and couponing, even though their product offering was competitively priced (the average burrito sold for under $10). Offering access to lower-priced entrees was not successful in increasing foot traffic, but instead was just subsidizing existing sales. At the time that Chris and his team were onboarded, Chipotle had not experienced a quarter-on-quarter increase in transactions in over two years. As they worked to rebound from the food safety crises, this stagnation in sales negatively impacted the team’s collective confidence. They turned to media and extolled the virtues of the brand’s fresh ingredients as a means to help gain new consumers, recover lost ones, and drive traffic.

Turning to the strategic pillars for guidance, the marketing team also set out to make the brand more loved. They shifted their attention to increasing the brand love of existing customers by introducing Chipotle Rewards, a loyalty program that rewards customers for repeat purchases. Points earned were not just redeemable for free food. Instead, Rewards members had the option to exchange them for branded merchandise to broadcast their love for Chipotle or apply them to charitable donations to reflect their alignment with Chipotle’s mission to “Cultivate a Better World.”

Beyond loyalty tactics, Chris and the team hoped to find ways to drive deeper, more meaningful engagement, making the brand more relevant in the consumer’s eye. To do so, they focused on their target consumers’ interest in sustainability and introduced *Real Foodprint,* a Chipotle app and web functionality that helps customers understand the potential impact of their choices. The tool compares Chipotle’s responsibly raised ingredients to those that are raised using conventional methods on measures like water saved, antibiotics avoided, and carbon removed.

In short, Chipotle's marketing strategy created amazing synergy: the media strategy was great at acquiring new customers, while the loyalty program did a terrific job at generating more repeat purchases from existing ones.

Place

Making the brand visible cascaded into the customer experience at restaurants. Chipotle's founder envisioned an open kitchen so customers could see the fresh ingredients being prepared and a line that showcased all the options available. Although it has since been copied by other restaurant concepts, this was revolutionary in the beginning and is a key to Chipotle's successful operating model. Showing real ingredients – heads of Romaine lettuce, bags of onions, and whole avocados – and classic culinary techniques (chopping, dicing, and cooking) to customers created a real culinary ambiance. The promotional strategy of the "Behind the Foil" campaign and product strategy of careful ingredient selection reinforced the brand's freshness and high-quality ingredients.

Making the brand relevant and loved meant anticipating consumer needs with technological advances. Chipotle embraced the digital movement by developing a mobile order app, repurposing a separate order preparation area for online orders, and building mobile pick-up shelves. In 2018, they redoubled efforts to be more relevant and loved with the introduction of the Chipotlane® – a drive-through lane allowing guests to pick up a pre-placed order with minimal delay and without having to leave their vehicle (see Exhibit 7). The Chipotlane accelerates the pick-up process, providing customers and delivery drivers with industry-leading convenience. Their holistic approach to bridging the digital and in-store experience helped Chipotle bring in new consumers.

Exhibit 7: Chipotlane®

RESULTS

Chris Brandt and the rest of the newly installed marketing team were interested not just in experimenting with ways to make Chipotle more visible, relevant, and loved. They wanted to ensure that their endeavors were successful. To do so, they relied upon marketplace data to evaluate their efforts (see Appendix C for a summary of the results).

Product

Chipotle's efforts to offer products that resonate with their target market were reflected in brand perceptions. Early market research results, captured in 2019, indicated an increase in consumer perceptions of the uniqueness and variety of menu offerings. At the beginning of 2023, Chipotle introduced seven new Lifestyle Bowls to cater to customers' wellness habits[3]. By 2023, Chipotle was viewed as the number one brand in the category that consumers associated with having "customized meals" and "unique menu items" and were ranked in the top three on "fresh/unprocessed ingredients". Limited-time offers (LTO's), like Smoked Brisket and Chicken al Pastor, were brought back in 2024 following their positive customer receptions in 2021 and 2023, respectively. These LTOs increased store traffic and transaction amounts, surpassing sales expectations.[4]

Chipotle's commitment to real ingredients sparked a renewed effort to purchase ingredients from local farmers. In 2023, they purchased 40 million pounds of produce from local farmers. That same year, Chipotle added another 304 acres to its organic farmland supply chain. Conversion is resource-intensive, requiring more than three years of strict adherence to organic certification regulations to achieve full organic status.

Promotion

Chipotle's focus on real ingredients and increased promotional investment resulted in immediate brand equity improvement. Consumer research showed a 13-point improvement (35% to 48%) in positive buzz about the Chipotle brand from 2018 to 2019. Negative attributes such as "I don't trust their food" and "I've heard negative things" declined by 8 and 7 points, respectively. More consumers also agreed that the brand has a mission, cares about the environment, and cares about more than profits. The positive year-over-year brand equity results provided initial support that the new strategy could help the brand become loved again. By 2023, positive word of mouth was at an all-time high for Chipotle.

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[3] Hospitality Technology (2023), "Chipotle to Drop SnapChat Lens to Promote Wellness", available at: https://hospitalitytech.com/chipotle-drop-snapchat-lens-promote-wellness

[4]Restaurant Dive (2025), Chipotle's LTOs drove 7% same-store sales bump in 2024 , available at: https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/chipotle-same-store-sales-increase-7-percent-2024-LTO-traffic-drivers/739266/#:~:text=Chipotle's%20smoked%20brisket%2C%20as%20seen,Tuesday%20during%20an%20earnings%20call

Chipotle's foray into the Super Bowl in 2021 with "Can A Burrito Change the World," expanded its promotional investment and sought to bring the new strategy to the world's largest stage. A comprehensive marketing plan began with an earned media strategy. Pre-game earned media reached 1,500 broadcast and online pieces. The campaign also included an offer of 50 bonus points for Chipotle Reward Members when they tweeted out a link to the commercial; over 48,000 members clicked on the interactive link. These pre-game marketing initiatives contributed to the ad's second-highest pregame engagement rate among all Super Bowl ads[5]. The pregame momentum continued in the critical period after the big game. In the 24 hours following the Super Bowl, the ad generated over 12 million views on YouTube and added another 2 million subsequently. As a point of reference, the most-watched Super Bowl ad in 2021, an Amazon Alexa spot featuring Michael B. Jordan, reached 77 million views[6]. To reinforce the overarching messaging around the brand's purpose, real ingredients, Chipotle supported the Super Bowl execution with a round-up campaign asking Chipotle customers to donate to the National Young Farmers Coalition. The campaign increased the daily donation average by 15% compared to other round-up efforts supporting its brand purpose in 2021.

Brand equity research revealed that the ad significantly increased awareness (+4.0), familiarity (+6.2), willingness to try a Chipotle restaurant (+7.8), and recommendation (+9.9)[7]. Data is not available to track the direct impact of these promotions on consumption or usage. However, data from the first quarter of 2021 point toward success, Chipotle's revenue increased by 23.4% to $1.7 billion, comparable restaurant sales increased by 17.2% and digital sales grew 133.9% year over year.

The "Can A Burrito Change the World" spot remains Chipotle's most-watched video (see Exhibit 8). Aiming to build on the Super Bowl momentum, Chipotle launched another ad campaign later the same year – "A Future Begins" – also focusing on brand purpose nearly eclipsed the Super Bowl ad, generating over 11 million YouTube views, demonstrating the positive momentum Chipotle gained from the Super Bowl.

Exhibit 8: "Can A Burrito Change the World"

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[5]iSpot TV.
[6] https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/2021-youtube-adblitz-awards/
[7] The Harris Poll (2022), "The Best $5.5 Million Chipotle Ever Spent," available at: The best $5.5 million Chipotle ever spent - Harris Poll (theharrispoll.com).

Chipotle's embrace of emerging social media platforms and focus on culturally relevant collaborations produced a viral moment. In August of 2022, an interview between Recess Therapy's Julian Shapiro-Barnum and a 7-year-old named Tariq took the internet by storm[8]; Tariq quickly became known as the "Corn Kid". Within 24 hours of the video's release, Chipotle's social media team contacted Tariq; in less than two weeks, content for a social media post was filmed. Chipotle's video with "Corn Kid" amassed 60.7 million views and 9.3 million likes on TikTok. This partnership also reached Instagram users, generating 46.1 million views and 33 million likes. Chipotle's ability to quickly and adeptly develop this collaboration gained national media attention with 768 earned online and broadcast media placements and 1.18 billion earned media impressions.

Solidifying its position as a social media vanguard, in 2023, Chipotle became the first restaurant brand to create a Snapchat lens to promote physical activity and wellness[9]. Launched on January 13, recognized as the day people are most likely to abandon their New Year's resolutions, the launch was accompanied by a free guacamole giveaway to 100,000 fans that used the augmented reality powered lens.

Chipotle continued its fan-driven social media strategy in 2025. Capitalizing on viral posts about tattoo sleeves resembling the classic Chipotle to-go bag, Chipotle promoted "Tatted Like a Chipotle Bag" with a temporary tattoo drop and one-hour BOGO. This culturally relevant moment drove the highest-ever sales for a non-peak hour and 102 million social impressions. One-day social media volume surged to the highest number in two years.

Price

Chipotle more than doubled its revenue between 2019 and 2024, growing from $5.59B to $11.31B[10]. Notably, they achieved quarter-on-quarter growth in transactions throughout 2024.

Chipotle Rewards proved to be incredibly successful. Often referred to as an industry exemplar and voted as one of America's best loyalty programs[11] just five years after its launch, the loyalty program boasted more than 20 million active members (at least one transaction per year), making it one of the

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[8] The New York Times (2022), "Corn Kid Is Doing Just Fine," available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/21/style/corn-kid-tariq-tiktok.html
[9]Hospitality Technology (2023), "Chipotle to Drop SnapChat Lens to Promote Wellness", available at: https://hospitalitytech.com/chipotle-drop-snapchat-lens-promote-wellness
[10] Statista (2025), "Revenue of Chipotle Mexican Grill from 2006 to 2024", available at: https://www-statista-com.ezp1.villanova.edu/statistics/221457/chipotle-total-revenue/
[11] Newsweek Global (2021), "America's Best Loyalty Programs."

country's largest. Global restaurant chains such as Starbucks[12] (34 million members) and Subway[13] (32 million members) are two other large loyalty programs.

The rewards program is credited with driving engagement, incenting purchase behaviors, and increasing the use of digital technology, with annual digital sales approaching $4 billion by the end of 2024. An example of the impact of Chipotle Rewards can be found in the Race to Rewards game the brand launched in 2021. The game, available to only Chipotle Rewards members, was played over 2.1 million times, with an average play time of 17 minutes per player. In honor of National Burrito Day in 2024, Burrito Vault, a word puzzle similar to the very popular Wordle, was launched for Chipotle Rewards members. The game logged over two million plays and led to Chipotle's best sales and digital sales day on record.[14] Following the rousing success of the in-app game for National Burrito Day, Chipotle resurrected its innovative Chipotle IQ trivia game, testing fans' knowledge about Chipotle ingredients and sustainability initiatives. The trivia game recorded a record number of gameplays for a Chipotle-created game and shattered the record for the number of new Chipotle Rewards members acquired in one day.

Place

Chipotlanes have revolutionized Chipotle's operations. Of the 304 company-owned restaurants opened in 2024, 257 included a Chipotlane. The average time at a Chipotlane – 30 seconds – far outpaces the traditional drive-through experience at Taco Bell (221 seconds) and Chick-Fil-A (325 seconds)[15]. The added convenience of the Chipotlane means some customers do not experience the open kitchen of a Chipotle restaurant. To preserve the visibility of real ingredients, Chipotle increased its promotional investment to enhance its digital experience. They partnered with PricewaterhouseCoopers to deliver a more personalized digital experience, creating a world-class mobile app capable of tailoring orders to individual needs and preferences. This investment is expected to yield a 1-2% increase in the average order value[16].

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[12] Business Insider (2024), "Companies are Doubling Down on Loyalty Programs," available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/companies-are-doubling-down-on-loyalty-programs-2024-8.html
[13] Subway (2023), "Subway Invites You to 'Refresh' Your Restaurant Loyalty by Matching up to 25 Million Points on National Sandwich Day," available at: https://newsroom.subway.com/2023-11-01-Subway-Invites-You-to-Refresh-Your-Restaurant-Loyalty-by-Matching-up-to-25-Million-Points-on-National-Sandwich-Day#.html
[14] Forbes (2025), "Chipotle Has Turned Burrito Day Into A Game—And Why That's The Point" available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephaniegravalese/2025/04/03/chipotle-has-turned-burrito-day-into-a-game-and-why-thats-the-point/
[15] Retail Brew (2023), "Inside the 'Chipotlane' Strategy," available at: https://www.retailbrew.com/stories/2023/03/01/inside-the-chipotlane-strategy.
[16]PricewaterhouseCoopers (2024), "Chipotle's 'Secret Salsa' for Digital Growth? Personalization at Scale," available at https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/case-studies/chipotle-digital-personalization-at-scale.html.

Chipotle in 2025

With a few years under their belts, the marketing team at Chipotle was able to retrospectively evaluate the success of their efforts to bring its purpose to the fore and make the brand more visible, relevant, and loved. By the end of 2023, positive word-of-mouth reached an all-time high, and the brand had risen to be the number one brand consumers associate with customized meals, unique menu items, and value. While many of its competitors observed a brand health decline from 2022 to 2023, Chipotle improved and outpaced its competitors. However, one competitor began to outpace Chipotle on a critical metric. Sweetgreen, a fast-growing chain focused on healthy salads and bowls, overtook Chipotle as the number one restaurant for real food. Nevertheless, these brand health metrics solidified the significant brand perception shift that began in 2019. By the start of 2025, Chipotle operated more than 3,700 company-owned locations with over 1,000 Chipotlanes.

Chipotle also faces challenges. Loyal customers took to social media to voice their displeasure with perceptions of shrinking portion sizes. The firm experienced a high-profile leadership transition in 2024; Brian Niccol, the CEO who oversaw the brand's resurgence, stepped down and was replaced by Scott Boatwright, who previously served as COO. At the end of the first quarter of 2025, Chipotle reported its first same-store sales decline since 2020.

KEY LEARNINGS/CONCLUSIONS

A series of food crises threatened Chipotle's brand reputation and financial prospects. When a new marketing team was installed, the challenge was daunting: how could they reengage disenchanted customers and rebuild the brand's shattered image? The marketing team discovered the crisis was a symptom of the brand losing its purpose, forgetting its "why", along the way. By returning to its roots – an unwavering purpose of being real – the brand became relevant and loved again.

Chipotle's renaissance reveals how commitment to purpose can catalyze a brand. The marketing team's singular focus on being real cascaded across the 4Ps and served as the brand's north star. Chipotle returned to its roots, focusing on delivering products with real ingredients, appearing in places that engaged the target consumer, designing a rewards program that emphasized loyalty versus arbitrary discounts, and creating a distinct culinary experience with ingredients reminiscent of a farmer's market.

Each element contributed to a comprehensive integrated marketing campaign that supported and reinforced brand purpose. Six years after the crisis, Chipotle's market capitalization and stock price have reached record levels, the customer base has grown 44%, and the restaurant chain has long-term plans to operate 7,000 restaurants across North America. The future has never looked brighter for Chipotle. The lessons are twofold. A relevant and differentiated purpose (a) can help regain the love lost and (b) must be continuously preserved, nurtured, and salient across the enterprise.

Case Study

AVAILABLE APPENDICES

A) Competitive Landscape in 2025
B) Timeline (2017-2022)
C) Rediscovering Purpose Results

This teaching case study was developed in collaboration with:

Case Study, Appendices, and Teaching Notes are available at
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