

**Scott Davis** Contributor*I transform brands, businesses, marketing—and people who power them*

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Chick-fil-A's Raving Fans' Growth Strategy

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As the Chief Growth Officer at Prophet, I see a lot of companies struggle with growth—both where to find it and how to manage it. And unfortunately, oftentimes marketing isn't even part of those conversations. That's why I never stop marveling at the way Steve Robinson, Chick-fil-A's senior vice president and chief marketing officer, and his team combine their role as marketers with the businesses' broader goals and growth targets.

Recently, I sat down with Steve to talk about what he's learned in his 32 years at the fast-growing QSR chain. Between gains from its existing restaurants and opening new stores, the company has been growing at the enviable rate of roughly 13 percent annually, which means the business doubles every five to seven years. Not jealous yet? For the last several years, it's even managed to do so with no borrowing.

"Our growth is based on two things," he says. "The first is brand relevance, which includes everything from menus, buildings, service, technology, packaging and sustainability. And next, we have a strong focus on our Operators to ensure they have what they need to grow same-store sales."

Here are six of Chick-fil-A's marketing strategies that apply to the many companies looking to find new paths to growth:

***Build your "raving fan" base** Long before social media experts talked about WOM and brand ambassadors, Chick-fil-A had identified a type of customer it nicknamed "Raving fans." Of the 7 to 10 million people eating at its restaurant each week, this is a rabid subset, about 10 to 15 percent of its

total audience. They visit Chick-fil-A four or more times each month, and are so jazzed about the company that they even dress up as the brand's famous cows to celebrate "Cow Appreciation Day" to win a free sandwich.

Of course, Robinson says the company always strives to bring new fans in at the top of the funnel. But these die-hards "are crucial to the health of the business and help us grow. Our goal and strategy is to build special relationships with them." To that end, Chick-fil-A Operators go to incredible lengths. They might follow a customer out to their car, holding an umbrella on a rainy day. A recent example: After Auburn's recent defeat of the [University of Georgia](#), some homebound fans phoned in an order, even though the store was about to close. Not only did the restaurant stay open, when the Operator discovered they were bereft "Dawg" fans, he gave them the meal for free. "No one told the Operator to do that," Robinson says. "They create these fans themselves every day, and we're constantly amazed at the innovative ways they think of to deliver this level of unexpected service."

***Know what will make your customers happy tomorrow**

Whether it's a Peppermint Chocolate Chip Milkshake, ever-more-clever cow "Eat Mor Chikin" ads, or a new mobile payment app, Robinson says the company tries never to lose sight of what delights its customers.

That also means reaching beyond known pleasure points to discover new ones: "Sometimes customers don't know what they want yet. Our job is to uncover those things and get out ahead of them. It's like my favorite Wayne Gretzky quote, 'We need to go where the puck is going, not where it's been.'"

To that end, Chick-fil-A recently opened "Hatch," its 80,000-square-foot innovation center, to explore new ideas in food, design and service. Among its breakthroughs so far: Streamlined technology to make ordering and payment faster and easier, and a new way of fixing chicken that actually required patenting and building a new custom grill. "By May, you'll hear us talking a lot about this new platform for grilled chicken. That is a hardware innovation, but it is key to our marketing message of relevant menu improvement."

***Build relationships, not transactions**

Selling more sandwiches is a good thing, but to Robinson, almost beside the point. Real growth, he maintains, comes from rich relationships, not minor sales blips. College football is one of his favorite examples, and the company has been involved with college sponsorship for 17 years. "It's our sweet spot," he says, "a demographic and lifestyle fit. College fans, alumni, and viewers index very high for Chick-fil-A." The company tracks engagement by measuring reactions to digital offers made during games: Some 75 percent of Chick-fil-A customers watch with a second screen in their hand.

“We also activate on the ground, giving away food at Chick-fil-A Bowl games, and at events on campus. Our Operators strike vendor relationships with stadiums. We have Operators in the communities who have great relationships with over 200 athletic departments where we provide catering.” Yes, it’s an expense, and not always an easy one for everyone to grasp. “But for us, measured in terms of relationships built and enjoyment for fans and our customers, it’s worth it.”

***Stand up for your customers, even when it’s difficult**

Robinson, who is also on the executive committee, says marketing has earned its seat at the table primarily “by being a relentless advocate for the customer.” Sometimes, he concedes, that requires tenacity. A current example: Building restaurants that are LEED-certified, a sustainability certification that carries greater expense. “That may not sound interesting to all of our leaders, but it is very important to our customers. Which makes it a priority.”

***Decide how you *won’t* grow**

Robinson and his team are keenly aware of the fierce battle for share of America’s stomach. More than half of the country’s meals are now eaten away from home. As restaurants proliferate, even convenience stores and grocery chains are now selling prepared meals, fighting for every breakfast, lunch and dinner. “But we know we will *not* compete on price. For us, the evolution has been how to do more than food. Yes, great crave-able food is the most important thing. But how do we plus-it-up with great service, interactions, and experiences?”

***Bring grace to the table**

Robinson admits he’s had to learn a lot, both personally and professionally, to roll with the punches that come with engaging on a political or social issue.

Last year, the company found itself embroiled in a controversy over remarks Dan Cathy, COO and son of founder Truett Cathy, made regarding same-sex marriage. The ensuing firestorm resulted in boycotts, protests, and even nasty Tweets from some mayors. The company eventually issued a statement that it would harken back to what has always been most important to Chick-fil-A – serving everyone with honor and respect. “The experience reminded me about the spirit of hospitality, of graciousness, that this company was founded on. Everyone is welcome at Chick-fil-A. Everyone should feel at home. The root idea is grace, and our Operators have really leaned in and stayed true to that model, even handing out food and water to protesters. Staying true to our core values can help weather any PR storm.

Steve’s tenacity at growing Chick-fil-A in both a gracious and aggressive manner should give current and future marketing leaders something to think about as they head into 2014.

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