

# Chipotle CMO Chris Brandt on Telling the Company's Story as It Makes Its Comeback

## ARTICLE |

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**A**fter several years of food safety challenges, Chipotle Mexican Grill had to rebuild its brand. Part of those efforts included bringing on Chris Brandt as CMO last year, who helped the company embrace digital as part of its efforts to reach Gen Z and millennials.

For our upcoming report on the future of the CMO, we spoke to Brandt about making Chipotle more visible and relevant to its customers through telling stories about the company's fresh-food values.

Below is an excerpted conversation with Brandt.

### **What are some of your priorities right now?**

When I came into Chipotle, our original purpose was to make the brand more visible, familiar and relevant. We wanted to keep the disrupted nature of the brand and celebrate what makes Chipotle special because the brand had spent a lot of time over the last few years being invisible. And where it was visible, it was focused against what others don't do as opposed to celebrating what makes Chipotle great. When I came in, I

wanted to change that tone. People have enough negativity, and we wanted to be much more positive.

### **What does "changing the tone" look like?**

I've always told my teams that our marketing job is threefold: We want to be innovators, storytellers and collaborators.

We've got to have a bunch of ideas, a good stage gate process to vet those ideas and move efficiently. We've got to put a lot of irons in the fire because you just don't know what's going to be the big idea unless you actually get it out there and test.

And then you have to find the stories of the brand and tell them because today's consumer — particularly at Chipotle where almost half of our consumers are Gen Zers or millennials — want to know the story behind the brand. That's something you didn't have to do much before. People not only want a conversation, they expect you to have one and understand what the brand stands for.

### **How is Chipotle telling that story?**

We use real, unprocessed ingredients that are responsibly sourced using classic cooking techniques to make really clean, delicious food — no microwaves, can openers or freezers. Those are fundamental things people didn't know.

The big moment for me happened just a few weeks in to the job. We were doing in-store training to get a behind-the-scenes look at what really happens. I went to a store opening around 7:30am, and Chipotle looked more like a farmer's market than any other restaurant I had ever seen: There were crates of peppers, bags of onions and boxes of avocados coming in. The team in the back was cutting and dicing ingredients — using real culinary skills to make all these raw ingredients into what we'd put on the line that day. I thought, "If we could show this to everybody, people would love it."

So I spoke with our agency, Venables up in San Francisco, about how we capture that. And that gave rise to our new ad campaign "Behind the Foil," where we use employees to talk about what makes Chipotle great and what they value most about it."

## **What makes the CMO role challenging today?**

The CMO has to be the most balanced left brain/right brain person in the organization. You have to be able to understand creative and messaging in an artful way, but you also have to be really analytical about what's truly driving the business, challenging the analytics, being on top of all the numbers. That is a rare person.

You [also] need to have a sense of, “Well, I want to try new things and come up with ideas, but at the same time, be practical.”

It's the art and science combination that makes that CMO job harder than it's ever been, but it should be more valuable than it's ever been because that's where growth can come for the organization. It's where you can rally the organization around a cause or a purpose. If you can't bring them to life in pictures, sound and storytelling, who else is going to do that?

## **What are some constraints that you're working under as you try to reach these growth or revenue goals?**

Budgets aren't growing, there's **so much pressure** on the bottom line, quarter by quarter. You have to deliver sales today and the brand tomorrow. And in a retail business, you've got to be about 80% in building sales today, or you won't be there tomorrow. We call it, “Winning today and cultivating the future.” But when I came into this business, we weren't winning in the daily, so we had to make sure that we were driving transactions and bringing more people in to the restaurants.

Now, we've been lucky that we've been able to build the brand [because] some investments you make are much more brand-oriented over time. Those are the ones that are harder to justify on the ROI sheet, but they're just as important to making sure that you can grow tomorrow the way you grow today, especially given consumers' desires to understand your brand values.

*Make sure to read our report, publishing in October.*