



Add positioning to your menu—and hold the carbs

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By Patrick Byers, Guest Columnist

I miss lunch most days. When I do, I usually end up gnawing on a low-carb Atkins bar—much to the amusement of my colleagues (yes, I'm one of *those* people).

So, when I actually do get to sit down at a restaurant to eat, I take it all in—the sights, the sounds, the smells. And since I'm a marketing freak, of course I'm constantly critiquing the experience. What's their brand like? How do they stack up? What are they doing that seems smart? Dumb? What can they do better?

A few months ago, I started frequenting my local Taco Time. The draw: they had recently launched a “low-carb” tortilla option. Finally, a fast-food restaurant responded to my eating habits—and those of my carnivorous brethren. I quickly became a Taco Time convert. A few weeks ago, I was happy to see shorter lines than usual when I arrived. I zoomed right up to the register and ordered my regular: a chicken soft taco on a low-carb tortilla. “Hot sauce on the side, please.”

“The low-carb tortilla has been discontinued,” said the young woman at the counter flatly, not realizing the impact of her words. “Uh . . . huh . . . what?” I responded ever-so eloquently. “Are you sure? You just introduced it a few months ago.” “I'm sure,” she replied.

After furrowing my brow and scanning the entire restaurant for evidence

to the contrary, I begrudgingly ordered my taco salad, hold the taco. Hell, hold the fun.

I sat there and nearly worked myself into a dither. Why had they abandoned the good ship Atkins so quickly? Was my low-carb lifestyle just a passing fad with its best days behind it? Why were their marketing materials so . . . well, “Taco Time?” And was their music always this bad? Now, their chairs . . . their tables . . . the entire experience suddenly seemed flat-footed and uninspired. The rose-colored glasses I had been wearing had been knocked off my face.

Back at the office I shared my experience with my colleagues. After poking a little fun, one of our Marketing Integrators asked, “Why do you go there anyway? The lines are short at Taco Time because Chipotle is kicking their butt. You should check 'em out.” After mispronouncing the name a few times, I decided I liked it. It was short, unique and engaging—and I was anxious for a new experience.

Two days later, one of my partners accompanied me to Chipotle. As I approached the building, I realized I was in for something very different. With funky, rusted metal exterior and signage, Chipotle was poles apart from Taco Time's plastic, almost generic fast-food feel or even the fun, surf-shack motif at Taco Del Mar.

As I walked in the door, I stepped into a long line. I didn't mind: the

music was pumping with a good mix of world, techno and pop. The energy in the room felt more like a hopping bar than lunchtime in Bellevue. The food smelled great and I asked myself, “What does Taco Time smell like? Does it have a smell?”

The Chipotle branding effort is evident everywhere. The décor is simple, but deliberate. The tables are metal and corrugated aluminum lines some of the walls. The staff wears black T-shirts with clever quotes on the back: “I made the salsa today” and “Spice is the variety of life” are two that immediately come to mind. Clearly, every contact point has been considered. I was impressed even before I ordered.

I ordered a “Burrito Bol” with lettuce instead of tortilla and fajitas instead of beans. Not only was it flavorful, I didn't have to face the ribbing I usually get for ordering something low-carb.

The differences between Chipotle and Taco Time highlight the stark contrast between a thoughtful, relevant brand and something a designer I recently met calls an “anti-brand.” Taco Time doesn't seem to connect with anyone. It's a place to buy tacos and burritos. Nothing more. Nothing less. But just as Starbucks long ago recognized coffee isn't the only thing its customers buy, Chipotle recognizes people aren't coming just for the grub.

These differences help illustrate a number of important principles:

1. Marketing is no longer just the 4 P's. Taco Time has the products, the place, the pricing and the promotion. What they don't have is "the position." Just because you are marketing, doesn't mean you are marketing well.
2. Without a promise, you have no brand. Taco Time's brand meant nothing to me, but one of their product options did. My affinity was to it, not their restaurant. Once it was gone, so was I. It works that way everywhere, and in most categories.
3. A well thought-out brand can crush an old, established one that has lost (or never gained) relevance. If your brand is flat, you'll be flattened by the next company that comes along that knows your customers better than you do.
4. A good position can fuel buzz—and buzz drives biz. While I see Taco Time's TV ads regularly, I have yet to see a single promotional piece from Chipotle. Word-of-mouth drove me to their restaurant. The experience and food are bringing me back. And when I come back, I'm often bringing others.
5. To break through, focus on the "whole product." Chipotle wouldn't

have had the same impact if their environmental design was bland. Or if their food was bad. Or if their communications were blasé. Consider all your contact points, and be more ambitious with your overall communications. God is in the details. Give them the attention they are due.

David Ogilvy was spot on when he said, "You cannot bore someone into buying your product." That's never been truer than it is today.

Effective marketing requires you to be brave and bold with your positioning, message strategy, branding and communications. If your marketing counsel isn't pushing you—hard—you should talk with someone who will.

Before your competition eats your lunch.

When Patrick Byers isn't playing armchair restaurant reviewer and dietician, he is President + CEO of Outsource Marketing, the Northwest-based marketing outsourcing pioneer that offers companies a marketing department if they don't have one, more strategic and creative horsepower if they do. To learn more, visit www.outsourcemarketing.com.