

How Regional Fast Food Restaurants Build Brand Identity to Reach Local Consumers

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Abstract

Loyalty can run deep, especially when it involves burger joints. This study used content analysis to understand the brand identities of three regional fast food restaurants: Culver's, In-N-Out Burger, and Whataburger. The author reviewed company websites, product packaging, and social media accounts to examine the portrayed identity of these popular chains. These brand identities incorporate regional culture and values in order to develop personal connections with local consumers, resulting in strong brand loyalty. In a fast food industry dominated by national and international competitors, these burger joints provide a lesson on how strong branding and catering to the specific tastes can lead to success.

I. Introduction

Loyalty can run deep, especially when it comes to burger joints. In Southern California, In-N-Out Burger has a cult-like following while Texas high school students head to the closest Whataburger for its signature spicy ketchup and fries after the Friday night football game. In the Midwest, one sings the praises of Culver's and its ButterBurgers and frozen custard. Culver's, In-N-Out Burger, and Whataburger are all regional, family-owned and -operated fast food restaurants that began in distinctly different regions in the United States. They incorporate the culture, language, and values of their home states or areas into their brand identity as a means to best connect with consumers and build loyalty. This study used content analysis of various communication materials utilized by Culver's, In-N-Out Burger, and Whataburger to determine how they built their brand to cater to regional customers.

II. Literature Review

In order to analyze how these fast food chains target their regional audience, it is important to understand the concepts of brand identity and consumer loyalty. There has been significant research conducted to determine what contributes to brand identity and consumer loyalty to a brand, examining the chain's regional industry marketing efforts. These established insights can be applied to this research.

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Brand Identity

A company's brand identity refers to the brand's personality that shapes how consumers view the brand. Components of a brand identity include the stylized company name, logo, tone, or the brand spokesperson, all of which should be reflective of the company's values and leave a memorable impression with consumers (Crystal & Herkowitz, 2010). The purpose of a brand identity is to communicate the company's experiences and activities, build perceptions with target audiences, and brand the company internally for its employees (Alhaddad, 2015). A common misconception is that having a strong brand identity directly results in consumer loyalty, but in actuality, the brand identity gives the employees a stronger understanding of the company and its values. This internal understanding thus leads to a better corporate environment, and consumers are attracted to companies with a strong, positive corporate identity (Singh, 2014).

Consumer Loyalty

Consumer loyalty refers to the tendency to favor a brand over all others. There has been extensive research done to figure out what factors into consumer loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995). Brands build trust with consumers by caring about more than just their company and profits, by providing special care to their consumers, charity work, or societal issues. Companies also build trust through consistency of pricing, performance, and corporate values and by providing entertainment value to audiences through creative, engaging content (Alhaddad, 2015).

Further research has focused on how consumer's view loyalty, by examining how consumers believe that their loyalty is earned, rather than bought through marketing efforts. Additionally, consumers expect loyalty to be reciprocal, whether it is through consistent products or pricing, customer loyalty programs, or other reward programs for discounts or special deals (Rundle-Thiele, 2006).

One study found that customer loyalty was reinforced by customer satisfaction and customer relationship inertia, or by consumers habitually purchasing the same product or from the same brand because they feel comfortable not having to make new choices (Cheng, Chiu, Hu, & Chang, 2011).

Additionally, although a brand identity is important in making lasting connections with its target audiences, customer satisfaction has been proven to first begin with the product, then the brand as a way to generate loyalty (Torres-Moraga, Vásquez-Parraga, & Zamora-González, 2008). A company can only build a faithful consumer base if it is able to deliver quality products or services.

Relationship theory helps to explain emotional connections built between consumer and a brand. When a relationship is formed early in life or introduced by significant others, these relationships are shown to hold the greatest emotional significance with an individual. Because of those two factors, there is significance in the nostalgia consumers associate with brands introduced in their childhood (Braun-Latour & Latour, 2007).

In terms of customer loyalty to fast food restaurants in particular, one study showed that the most influential factors are cleanliness of the restaurants, product taste, and employee competence (Meyers & Wallace, 2003). Culver's, one of the restaurants included in this study, was part of the Meyers and Wallace study and ranked highly across all factors with the Midwest audience. The results of this study should be kept in mind when examining how this burger restaurant has developed a loyal consumer base.

Regional Marketing

Before delving into marketing for regional brands, it is important to understand the idea of a regional community and the pride an individual typically associates with the place they call home. The word community is defined as "a safe haven where everyone looks after each other, where everyone feels at home" (Kozeny, 2000). Regional brands refer to brands or products marketed in a restricted geographical area, and when it comes to their marketing efforts, regional brands often "appeal to the idiosyncratic tastes of the region" (Braun-Latour & Latour, 2007). They evoke nostalgia or regional pride, and consumers often prefer the quality of a regional product compared to national competitors (Braun-Latour & Latour, 2007).

An industry where the regional identity is especially important to the product is the wine industry. In research conducted on the California wine industry, regional information on product labels positively shaped consumers' perception of the product's quality. It is believed that this is due to consumers' motivation to buy

locally due to ethnocentrism, or judging another culture based on the values of one's own culture (Bruwer & Johnson, 2010).

This study will explore how regional fast food restaurants target their local audiences and build consumer loyalty through their communications strategies. The research questions include:

RQ1. In what ways do these restaurants use regional cues to build their brand identities?

RQ2. What about the restaurants' brand appeals to the regional audiences?

III. Methods

This study used qualitative content analysis to determine the brand identities developed by three regional fast-food restaurants: Culver's, In-N-Out Burger, and Whataburger. These restaurants were chosen for their popularity and represent three distinct regional areas: Culver's from Wisconsin and the Midwest, In-N-Out from California and the West Coast, and Whataburger from Texas and the South.

To understand brand identity, the author looked at the website, product packaging, and social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) for each of these restaurants over a one-month period, October 2016. The author analyzed the written and visual elements of the communication strategies to understand each brand's identity and what specifically caters to the tastes and values of the regional target audience. The author considered each company's slogans, corporate mission, history, menu, community or charity involvement, and any additional content that mentioned the restaurant's location. Visually, logo, signature color, and website design contributed to the brand identity.

On each website, the author restricted the content included in the study to the website's main page and webpages accessed from the main page with one mouse click. For coding purposes, the author went through these pages tracking frequently used language reflecting the restaurant's location, menu items, company values, and key words that the author determined best described the restaurant's portrayed identity. The product packaging was deconstructed for visual elements including colors, images, and any included text to understand how the packaging contributes to the brand identity. Finally, the author utilized the visual and textual elements of the social media accounts to build an understanding of brand identity, particularly elements that were consistent across the three strategies included in the content analysis.

IV. Findings

Culver's

The Midwestern fast food favorite, Culver's, has origins that go further back than its own opening. Wisconsin natives, George and Ruth Culver, with a family background in dairy farming bought an A&W, an already existing fast food chain, in 1961 in Sauk City, Wisconsin. Their three kids grew up in the restaurant environment, and with George and Ruth's guidance, their son Craig and his wife Lea opened the first Culver's in Sauk City in 1984. Craig Culver opened the chain as a way to feature his mother's homemade burgers and his favorite treat, custard. These items are now Culver's signature combination, ButterBurgers¹ and Fresh Frozen Custard. Today, Culver's remains owned and operated by the Culver family, with Craig Culver still serving as CEO, and its corporate mission is that "Our guest who chooses Culver's leaves happy" (www.culvers.com). The restaurant now has more than 500 locations, 136 of which are in the family's native Wisconsin.

Table 1 notes observations made during the content analysis of Culver's website, product packaging, and social media.

¹ ButterBurgers are made of a lightly buttered and toasted bun – where it gets its namesake – and three cuts of beef: sirloin, chuck, and plate.

Table 1. Messages to Build Culver’s Brand Identity

Website	Product Packaging	Social Media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imaging includes an outline of Wisconsin, star on Sauk City’s location • Emphasis on Wisconsin and Midwest values • Emphasis on fresh, local food • Thank You Farmers – Culver’s support of National Future Farmers of America and local Wisconsin farms • Extensive information on menu items and custard flavors • “Delicious Perks” – customer loyalty programs, tie into the “Welcome to Delicious” slogan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses signature blue color, logo, and “Welcome to Delicious” slogan • Cups showing farm landscape, Thank You Farmers message 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes content across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram • National Cheese Curd Day promotion – multimedia content • “Curd Nerds” in-store contest promoted online • Involvement in Future Farmers of America Convention • Use of #ThankYouFarmers • Promoting the launch of their Snapchat account • Twitter – participating in relevant trending topics (ex. National Chocolate Day)

While investigating Culver’s website, social media channels, and product packaging, the key messages include an emphasis on Wisconsin values and commitment to supporting local farms and the Future Farmers of America. Culver’s discusses how much it values hospitality, starting with Ruth Culver and her “spirit of genuine hospitality,” the mission of the chain to have every Culver guest leave happy, and the taste of its food and the overall dining experience (www.culvers.com). In addition to Culver’s Wisconsin hospitality, it brands its products as uniquely Midwestern, like its “fresh Midwest beef” and “genuine Wisconsin Cheese Curds” (www.culvers.com). Not only are these menu items explicitly tied to Wisconsin and the Midwest, but an item like cheese curds is not typically found at a fast food restaurant. The regional menu item helps differentiate Culver’s from other restaurants.

Culver’s credits the Wisconsin farming community for providing fresh food and for giving back through the “Thank You Farmers” initiative. This includes producing informational content on local eating, transparency about where the food is from, and involvement in the National Future Farmers of America Foundation, all of which are incorporated in the communication strategies analyzed. Outside of the farming community, Culver’s shares stories of its involvement in local schools, police departments, and additional fundraising events (www.culvers.com).

Another part of this study involved coding for specific key words used throughout Culver’s website (Refer to Table 2). These frequently used words reflect Culver’s values, products, and ultimately its brand identity. Particularly notable is the usage of the word “fresh,” which directly reflects its partnership with local Wisconsin farms, and the word “Wisconsin,” the birthplace that Culver’s ties itself closely to.

Table 2. Key Words Used by Culver’s Website

Key Word	# of Mentions
ButterBurger	6
Custard	8
Cheese curd	5
Wisconsin	7
Family	5
Farm/farmer	6
Fresh	12

In-N-Out Burger

In 1948, husband-and-wife team Harry and Esther Snyder opened their first drive-through hamburger stand in Baldwin Park, California. The drive-through stand and the introduction of the two-way speaker for ordering were particularly innovative for the time. Since its opening, In-N-Out has maintained that it will “serve only the highest quality product, prepare it in a clean and sparkling environment, and serve it in a warm and friendly manner.” These are core values reflected in the slogan, “Quality you can taste” (www.in-n-out.com). Today, Lynsi Snyder, the Snyder’s granddaughter, is In-N-Out’s president, and the company’s headquarters are in Irvine, California. With more than 300 stores, the chain is predominately in California, Nevada, Arizona, and Oregon, and there are a number of locations throughout the state of Texas (www.in-n-out.com).

Table 3 notes observations made during the content analysis of In-N-Out Burger’s website, product packaging, and social media platforms.

Table 3. Messages to Build In-N-Out Burger’s Brand Identity

Website	Product Packaging ²	Social Media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of red, yellow, and white • Usage of palm trees in content and outside of every physical restaurant • Charitable work with Child Abuse Foundation • Minimal written content – only information on company history and charitable causes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency of red and white colors • Palm tree pattern • Usage of Bible quotes on the bottom of cups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inactive social media presence • Facebook – last posted in May 2016 • Twitter – last posted in June 2011 • Instagram – last posted in August 2016

In-N-Out represents “a romanticized version of Southern California: palm trees and hot rods and harmless fun on a Friday night at the drive-in” (Wilkins, 2004). In-N-Out largely creates this idea through its iconic imaging – palm trees both in design and physically planted outside of stores, signature bright colors, and its history as the first drive-thru burger joint of California – and its website and product packaging largely align with this imagery.

That being said, In-N-Out had the least amount of written content across its website and nonexistent or inactive social media channels. This could be due to the established popularity In-N-Out already had by the time companies began developing online sites and utilizing social media marketing, so the company may not see it as a means to gain business.

Table 4 indicates key words and the number of mentions counted in coding In-N-Out Burger’s website. The words “California” and “quality” were by far the most commonly used terms. The language

² In-N-Out includes Bible verse notations on the bottom of cups and on burger wrappers. Richard Snyder, the son of the founders, decided to start including them in 1987, because “it was something [he] wanted to do” (Grossman, 2005). Though this could be seen as a religious statement from the company, In-N-Out is not known as a Christian company, and most customers never notice the verses.

reinforces how ingrained California residents are in In-N-Out's identity and its focus on quality. Its slogan is focused on "quality you can taste" and that idea is prevalent throughout the site.

Table 4. Key Words Used by In-N-Out Burger's Website

Key Word	# of Mentions
California	18
Hamburger, burger	8
Animal style burger	3
Double double	2
Palm tree	2
Quality	24

Whataburger

Whataburger opened in August 1950 by entrepreneur Harmon Dobson as a burger stand in Corpus Christi, Texas. Dobson wanted to serve a burger so large that it required two hands to hold and cause customers to say after a single bite, "What a burger!" Burgers are made-to-order or as the slogan suggests, "Just like you like it" (www.whataburger.com). Whataburger remains family-owned and operated. The chain was run by Harmon Dobson's wife, Grace, after his death in 1967. Their son, Tom, took over in 1993. Since Dobson's first stand, Whataburger aims to "serve the highest quality products, treat others with respect, invest in the community and be fiscally responsible" (www.whataburger.com). Today, the Texas-based restaurant has almost 800 locations in every state from Arizona to Texas, where its headquarters are now in San Antonio (www.whataburger.com).

Table 5 notes observations made during the content analysis of Whataburger's website, product packaging, and social media platforms.

Table 5. Messages to Whataburger's Brand Identity

Website	Product Packaging	Social Media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image focused on orange and white stripes, A-frame style building • Page dedicated to press releases about Whataburger's involvement in the community and events they will be attending • Showcases social media posts from customers on every page • Emphasis on joining the "Whataburger family" through information on careers • Includes menu information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orange and white stripes • Use of Texas state outline on paper bags • Humorous sayings on the bags (ex. "Rarely do the fries make it all the way home") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook – image-based content • Twitter – active engagement with followers, trendy language (ex. bae, GOAT) targeted towards Millennials and Gen Z • Instagram – reposting customer generated content • Using content across social media platforms • Focus on Texas and Texas lifestyle/culture • Humorous tone, pop culture references

A reoccurring theme in Whataburger's content is family or community, which are reflected in the company website and social media content. An entire page of Whataburger's website is dedicated to the company's charitable involvement in the towns in which its stores are located as well as a calendar of local events supported by Whataburger. Additionally, in the information about jobs with Whataburger, employees are referred to as family members. Whataburger also builds a sense of community with its customers by utilizing consumer-generated content on its website and on social media, particularly Instagram. This makes customers feel more included and appreciated by the company.

Whataburger also ties itself closely to Texas. Although the chain has expanded, the company says, "we're born in Texas, and it will always be home" (www.twitter.com/Whataburger). The Texas culture and identity is reflected in the language used and product packaging. Even some menu items are marketed as being spicy or on Texas toast, which differentiates Whataburger's products from other fast food restaurants.

Table 6 tracks the number of mentions for key words. As previously noted, Whataburger largely emphasizes the idea of family, seen its frequent usage on its website. Texas was the second most used word, reiterating the importance Whataburger places on its home state even after its expansion across the Southeast.

Table 6. Key Words Used by Whataburger's Website

Key Word	# of Mentions
Texas	7
Community	4
Family	14
Hot, fresh or hot and fresh	3
Spicy	6

V. Discussion

Building a Brand Identity

While these regional restaurants have built a unique brand identity, they all have reoccurring themes: quality or freshness of product, involvement in charitable endeavors, and remaining family-owned.

The quality and freshness of the product is seen throughout the communication strategies. Culver's highly publicizes its products coming fresh from local farms. The idea of having fresh or genuine Wisconsin food strengthens consumer perception of quality products. In-N-Out Burger places importance on the quality of the food as well, which is seen in the frequency of the word "quality," as noted in *Figure 4*. Even the company's logo is "Quality you can taste" (www.in-n-out.com). This focus on product quality correlates with the study in *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* which found that "the process of loving a brand starts with a product" based on quality, consistency, and overall consumer satisfaction and then consumers develop a love for the brand (Torres-Moraga, Vásquez-Parraga, & Zamora-González, 2008).

When it comes to these restaurants' involvement in charitable activities, Culver's supports local farms and the National Future Farmers of America Organization, and is involved in various events and fundraising efforts for the organization. This relationship suggests to customers that Culver's cares about more than just making a profit, and is heavily involved in organizations important in the Wisconsin area (www.culvers.com). Instead of partnering with a specific charity or cause, Whataburger is involved in various service events, such as hosting a lunch for military personnel in Fort Hood and donating a percentage of a day's store sales to the local high school in Cedar Park, Texas (www.whataburger.com). This kind of involvement shows Whataburger's commitment to making a positive difference in the community, while the individual locations are able to be involved in events and fundraisers specific to the area's needs.

Culver's, In-N-Out-Burger, and Whataburger remain family owned. Ruth Culver's legacy helps to motivate Culver's employees aim to continue "Ruth's spirit of genuine hospitality across all our restaurants" (www.culvers.com). In-N-Out Burger, in particular, has refused to franchise and remains owned by the

Snyder family, and customers “feel like they are part of something with In-N-Out...It still feels like a mom-and-pop operation” (Klara, 2015). These company values encourage consumers to be a part of continuing the respective owners’ legacies, giving a more personal touch to the companies. Additionally, the physical size of each company contributes to the local feel. Culver’s has 585 stores, In-N-Out Burger has 313 stores, and Whataburger has 805 stores. In comparison, McDonald’s has over 36,000 restaurants in more than 100 countries (About us: McDonald’s facts and story, 2016). These restaurants feel local, because they are typically limited to certain parts of the country, making it more special or unique when a consumer comes across any location.

Appeal to Regional Audiences

As discussed by Braun-Latour and Latour (2007), regional brands “appeal to the idiosyncratic tastes of the region” through nostalgia or regional pride. This is applicable to the restaurants in this study because the communities are an integral part of brand identity.

Whataburger, for example, utilizes facets of Texas culture – Friday night football games, homecoming traditions – and incorporates these elements in its images and written content. Whataburger is so successful in tying its identity to Texas that the state Legislature declared the restaurant a “Texas Treasure” on its 50th anniversary for “capturing the hearts – and the taste buds – of millions of Texans” (Whataburger declared a Texas treasure, 2001). Although Whataburger has locations outside of Texas, its home state claims ownership and vice versa. This creates a deeper relationship with Texas consumers, because Whataburger capitalizes on state pride, setting it apart from other burger restaurants and making it feel like a more hometown experience for customers.

Culver’s provides an innately Midwestern and specifically Wisconsin feel. One Culver’s customer describes the hometown feeling of nostalgia best: “I feel most at home when I am in my regular corner booth at my neighborhood Culver’s in Shorewood, Wisconsin” (O’Neil, 2015). Nostalgia is a proven factor of consumer loyalty because it provides a deeper emotional connection to a specific time or place than simply an appreciation for the food.

It is important to note that, even though these restaurants cater to a regional audience, they do not alienate customers outside of that demographic. On Trip Advisor, a website of user-generated reviews and recommendations for hotels, restaurants, and things to do while travelling, In-N-Out Burger is one of the top ranked restaurants in California, consistently earning four or more stars out of five. One reviewer gave an L.A. location five out of five stars, saying, “First time visitor in L.A. had to see what the fuss was about,” while another said, “I always miss In-N-Out when we are not in California” (In-N-Out Burger, 2016). These comments reinforce that idea that *San Diego Union-Tribune* writer John Wilkens noted, “Anyone who has spent much time at an In-N-Out has probably seen tourists...The food items become a part of the travel experience” (2004).

Restaurants’ “Cult Followings”

Culver’s, In-N-Out Burger, and Whataburger have all built a niche for these businesses. More than just loyalty, however, these restaurants have been associated with a “cult following.” Wilkens describes cult foods as “culinary comforts that attract followings based almost as much on nostalgia or identity as flavor,” and the deeper connection can be attached to a person, place, or particular time (2004).

The cult followings these burger restaurants have garnered can be seen in a variety of ways. Culver’s ButterBurgers compete alongside international chains like McDonald’s and Wendy’s on *Business Insider*’s rankings of “fast food menu items with cult followings” (Bhasin, & McConnell, 2012). In-N-Out has been referred to as “a cult that just happens to serve burgers” (Chiao, 2013). One Texas couple gained media attention when they visited every Whataburger store, 729 locations at the time, across 10 states (Washeck, 2013). All of these individual incidents are reflective of numerous other similar instances and the passionate customer base all of these have built for themselves. It exemplifies the extent to which the restaurants have connected with its consumers.

VI. Conclusion

The study illustrates that regional fast food restaurants utilize their geographical location as an inherent part of their brand identity and are able to build brand loyalty through the local connection with consumers. In an industry dominated by international chains like McDonald's, the ability for regional companies to develop such a high level of consumer loyalty is a lesson for the fast food industry as well as communications professionals aiming to understand branding and consumer loyalty. These restaurants reflect their consumers' culture and values, building deeper relationships with the community. This kind of emotional connection with their target audience is what all brands hope to achieve. These restaurants succeed because they are more than just burger joints; they are part of the family.

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