

Super Fans

Are your customers willing to Tweet, travel, and be turbo-charged fans for your brand? If not, there are four things that can change that.



Madison, Wisconsin, TCBY franchisee Saad Khalifa is on a first-name basis with his customers, especially those who visit his frozen yogurt shop regularly. When Steve drives an hour and 35 minutes to the Madison TCBY, Khalifa is ready with the customer's consistent order of two pies and about 10-12 quarts of ice cream. "And that's just like clockwork every week," Khalifa says. "He'll call in two days ahead and we'll get everything ready for him."

As TCBY proves, some chains and menu items have extreme fans that will travel far and wide to reach them, and there's a method to the madness. According to Kevin Moll, CEO of National Restaurant Consultants, Inc., creating turbo-boosted fans takes four key ingredients: signature items, a compelling story, an engaging environment, and social media.

"It is the understanding that a restaurant is two things," Moll says. "It is an entertainment venue that provides an environment whereby your guest cannot get that entertainment anywhere else. The second component is that these people have to be totally bought in to your mission, your theme, and who you are."

One of Dairy Queen's crazed fans got so hooked on the Blizzard, the quick serve's signature frozen treat, that the chain dubbed him "Blizzard Guy," says Michael Keller, chief marketing officer at Dairy Queen. "He had a personal mission, a vision he must have had, to eat a Blizzard in every state. So this man drove the entire United States up, down, left, right, ending last year in Alaska, and finally got his 50th blizzard in his 50th state." Keller says that after the man shared his story with the chain, Dairy Queen's management thanked him with a few freebies, and they also included his story on one of its new marketing items, a "history of fun" poster that will hang in Dairy Queen stores across the nation.

"It's 25 years of goofiness," Keller says about the poster. "He is one of the fun things that has happened to the Blizzard brand over the years. We love him for it."

And Blizzard Guy isn't the only one who loves Blizzards or freebies: The Dairy Queen Web site has a whopping 2.3 million members of its Blizzard fan club. "These are people who love the Blizzard so much that they basically sign up to not only get a few free blizzards, but just to find out what's going on with the Blizzard brand before other people do," Keller says.

“In terms of having fans that do crazy things, it’s possible you could argue we have millions of them—2.3 million and growing, to be specific.” Dairy Queen’s Facebook page is also approaching 1 million fans, again showing the benefits of social media.

“The way that you turbo charge this crazed fan base is by developing relationships, and that’s why today the social marketing piece is so important for restaurant operators,” Moll says. “You can communicate directly with them, and you can let these people know what’s going on largely on a minute by minute or a daily basis. People appreciate that.”

For Krystal Burger, a virtual hall of fame allows crazed Krystal fans to connect with their favorite burger chain. “We started it in 2005,” Wahl says, “and the reason for that was to have an official organization and to celebrate the passionate guests of our brand.”

Krystal Hall of Fame members are recognized for having an abnormal affinity for the brand, and if chosen, their headshot is printed on Krystal Burger boxes, and an official recognition ceremony is held at their local Krystal store. One 2009 inductee, Terry Rogers of Franklin, Tennessee, says that it’s the special taste of Krystal that makes fans crave the mini-burgers. “My whole family loves them,” she says. “Everyone in the South pretty much grew up on Krystals.”

Rogers says that as a child back in the ’50s, her family started going to the restaurant for a family dinner every Friday night, and she still eats there regularly to this day. Although Krystal, TCBY, and Dairy Queen all have relatively long histories, Moll says that newer restaurants can also gain the same type of fandom.

“If you don’t have history, that’s OK,” Moll says, “but you have to have a story. And the story needs to be true.” Via social media, Web sites, and in-store menu marketing, Krystal Burger, TCBY, and Dairy Queen make sure to share their personal stories with customers, creating a stronger bond between fan and chain.

“There’s no less than 50 things that are in it for the restaurant,” Moll says about the benefits of the faithful customer. “You can start with No. 1: sales. You’re sales are probably going to be higher than a competitor’s. No. 2: You’re probably going to be more profitable because you’re selling signature items ... Then the next thing: You’re going to have less competition because there’s a ton of brand equity. Lastly, there’s less economic risk. When other restaurants might not be doing quite as well, the restaurants that have raving loyal fans are not as economically impacted.”

Krystal’s Wahl agrees that brand equity and a unusual story are critical when attracting a strong fan base. “Sometimes you want to follow the big guy, you want to be a copy cat,” he says. “You’re never going to be a brand that’s craveable or uniquely differentiated if all you’re doing is copying what everybody else is doing. I think the customer today has an expectation of variety and unique offerings, and they will go out of their way to find that very unique experience.”



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