

AUGUST 2025

Cracker Barrel vs. Waffle House: Which is Smarter?

There are three classic Southern food icons: **Waffle House**, **Cracker Barrel**, and **Krispy Kreme**. One of them took a big stumble lately by compromising its iconic brand! You guessed it: Cracker Barrel.

It's been said that whenever you read an obituary for a senior, Cracker Barrel has just lost a core customer. The classic brand was founded in 1969 and, [according to Fox News](#), has been implementing gradual changes since 2020.

For decades, Cracker Barrel has been a bastion for homestyle cooking, a fun country store shopping experience, and the feel that you have traveled back in time to a small town.

First, let's address the logo. A logo is a living, breathing personification of the brand – illustrating what the company stands for and the brand promise that the company makes. By simplifying the logo, removing the older guy leaning against the barrel, Cracker Barrel moved away from being people-focused and relationship-focused. The new logo implies, "We're no longer about people and relationships. We sell stuff. We're just another casual restaurant."

The logo from 1979 featured a man they called "Uncle Herschel" sitting on a wooden chair and leaning on a cracker barrel. That barrel symbolized country living, where people often used a barrel as a small table, where they could share a meal or snack, or even play checkers.

When the CEO stated on [Good Morning America](#) that "people like what we're doing," let's consider for a minute who those "people" are:

- The logo designer, who was paid
- The logo designer's family, because they can go on a nice vacation
- The marketing director, who approved the change
- The employees, who are operating under "[The Emperor's New Clothes](#)" concept, are afraid to express any contrary opinion for fear of losing their jobs



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Next, how about culture? The commitment to traditional Southern family values began to slowly shift five years ago, which resulted in a change in the customers and employees the brand attracted.

The most dramatic changes began in 2020, when Cracker Barrel altered its rule **against serving alcohol**. That changed when the pandemic began. Another big change: the company relaxed its dress code for employees, moving away from neat haircuts and trimmed facial hair.

One writer opined that the only spokesperson who could save Cracker Barrel is **Sydney Sweeney**, who is the face of the high-profile campaign that boosted the awareness of **American Eagle** apparel with her "Jeans/Genes" messaging.

Now, compare Cracker Barrel to **Waffle House**, the down-home favorite for waffles, hashbrowns, endless cups of coffee, and an occasional brawl late at night. Waffle House still uses the same logo – so simple and basic – that it launched the brand with back in 1955.

Check out [this tongue-in-cheek video](#) about how marketers might re-imagine Waffle House today in a way that would lose its identity and its soul. And its core customer base!

And read below about my **Krispy Kreme** experience, which happens frequently.

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Fast-Foods Can't Compete with Chili's

Chili's has not only declared war on fast-food concepts; Chili's is winning the battle!

At a time when McDonald's is responding to higher prices by lowering some breakfast and meal prices, Chili's continues to win the battle for value with its \$10.99 burger special.

[National Restaurant News](#) reports that Chili's is a better option than a McDonald's Big Mac Meal.

Consider:

- The average Big Mac Meal costs \$9.72, which includes a medium drink and a medium fry
- The **Chili's \$10.99 Big Smasher** on the chain's 3-for-Me menu offers a better burger, bottomless chips and salsa, and free drink refills
- Chili's portions are more generous than the Golden Arches and other fast-food options

So, how does it work at Chili's? A former Chili's executive told me that the restaurant stands by its \$10.99 offer but is banking on you and me as customers to choose some add-ons, such as an alcoholic beverage, an extra appetizer, or a dessert. The result? **The \$10.99 offer frequently becomes \$15 or more.**

[According to The Wall Street Journal](#), Chili's has become the poster child for success in the otherwise challenged restaurant industry by aggressively marketing its value and cultivating a lighthearted vibe on social media.

The chain's turnaround has helped the company more than double its share price over the last 12 months. Meanwhile, other casual dining options such as **Applebee's** and **Friday's** are struggling to replicate Chili's success.

Chili's is responding to its success by doling out raises equal to 200% of its proposed amounts, thus helping the chain retain its best chefs, servers, and managers.

The question for you: How can YOU distinguish yourself in a crowded field from your competitors?



Smart Move: Crispy Chicken Sandwich Wars Return

[The Wall Street Journal reports](#) that the Crispy Chicken Sandwich Wars have returned.

No matter which you prefer, from battered, breaded, and fried to grilled, in the forms of a sandwich, tenders, or nuggets, chicken has become the fast-food industry's weapon of choice. Consider:

- Market leader **Chick-fil-A** is upgrading restaurants to improve the speed of service
- **Wendy's** is launching new chicken tenders later this year
- **McDonald's** rolled out its own chicken tenders and chicken Snack Wrap in May
- **WingStop** launched crispy chicken tenders in Februar
- **Raising Cane's** is adding 100 new locations this year
- A new concept – **Layne's**, is opening locations throughout Texas

Meat Math

Tightening cattle supplies have elevated beef prices to record levels, **so the best profit margins currently are in chicken**. While fast-food burger operations used to offer chicken as an option (a necessary evil), they now see poultry as a smart way to grow profits.

So, if **Clara Peller** were still alive, would Wendy's have her ask, **"Where's the Chicken?"**



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Smart Value Proposition: Tiebreaker: Krispy Kreme Gives "Positively Outrageous Service"

You can tell by my waistline that I've indulged in my share of doughnuts, Twinkies, Ding Dongs, and more. Please allow me to brag on the **Krispy Kreme** doughnut shop in Arlington, where I go every Sunday.

Sometimes, I'll order one doughnut, or occasionally two. One will always be the hot glazed doughnut. Here's the fun part:

About 25% of the time, the cashier at the window will comp me the hot glazed doughnut. If that's all that I order, the cashier smiles and tells me to have a nice day. If I order a second doughnut, they just charge me for one. Not all of the time, but often enough to write about here!

Krispy Kreme is practicing "**Positively Outrageous Service**" and earning customer loyalty.

My friend, groundbreaking customer service authority **T. Scott Gross**, wrote "**Positively Outrageous Service**" in 1991.

The book led him to become an in-demand national speaker, and he consulted with such brands as Southwest Airlines, Ford, and Church's Chicken.

The three premises of Positively Outrageous Service on **how to delight and astound your customers** are:

1. It must be **random and unexpected**
2. It must be **out of proportion to the circumstances**
3. It must **invite the customer to "play"** (have fun) with the service provider

If you don't know how to deliver Positively Outrageous Service and elevate your customer experience, please call me at 817-205-2334 and I'll help you learn how to WOW your customers.

