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SUSTAINABLE BRANDS CASE STUDY

# Content Marketing at Chipotle: A Tool for Better Brand Positioning and Authentic Customer Engagement

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*“Much of our marketing is aimed at making consumers more curious about where their food comes from and how it is prepared. By making complex issues about food production more understandable – even entertaining – we are reaching people who have not typically been tuned into these types of issues.”*

*- Mark Crumpacker, Chief Marketing and Development Officer, Chipotle*

## Executive Summary

Beyond simply selling burritos, chips, and other Mexican fare, Chipotle is on a mission to change the way people think about and eat fast food. The company has found innovative, creative, thought-provoking, and humorous ways to articulate its sustainable agriculture commitments to its customers, all while spending next-to-nothing on TV advertising. Chipotle has used print ads to create thought-provoking and humorous messages, and has mastered viral online content marketing in efforts to spark effective genuine connection with customers.

## Background

Ever since its very inception, Chipotle has defied the conventional perception that fast food has to be heavily processed, made with cheap ingredients, prepared offsite and reheated in restaurants by people who have little interest in what they are doing. Instead, Chipotle uses high quality, fresh ingredients and prepares all of the food it serves in kitchens using classic cooking methods.

Chipotle’s commitment to sustainable agriculture, or “Food with Integrity”, began when the company was first established and was based on the founders’ belief that it was the right thing to do. This commitment did not develop out of a strategy to create a marketing or communications platform; rather, the company wanted to create good-tasting food and found that animals, vegetables, and fruits raised or grown in a sustainable way tasted better. While Chipotle was still small, articulating that commitment to its customers was relatively easy. As the company grew, however, talking about its commitment became increasingly challenging and early attempts met resistance by customers who seemed to not understand or appreciate messages about sustainable agriculture coming from a fast food Mexican restaurant chain.



## Initiative Design and Execution

Faced with said initial resistance from customers, Chipotle realized there was a large gap between what the company was doing vis-à-vis sustainable agriculture and the mainstream discussion around 'Big Ag' issues. Chipotle began working to bridge that gap and create messages that aimed at finding a balance between being ahead of mainstream America, on the one hand, but also not so far ahead that these messages got lost on people, on the other hand. In a sense, the brand positioned itself in a way that pushed the boundaries on current agricultural discussions without being too aggressive.

In this process, Chipotle has utilized PR and advertising, as well as smart content marketing. The company has incorporated key messages into its advertising and aims to create messages that are at once provocative, emotive, and humorous in order to get people's attention and prompt them to further explore agricultural issues. Print ads have been a corner stone of the company's media outlet efforts, but the brand is perhaps best known for its brilliant use of original content marketing in creating authentic engagement.

Content marketing provides a good medium between Chipotle's advertising work -- which gives the company a lot of control but not a lot of real estate to share involved, sensitive, and nuanced stories -- and the company's PR work, which provides third-party credibility and real estate to discuss issues, but doesn't give the company control over specific messaging. By expanding into content marketing, the brand has effectively found a way to create both control over content and the real estate to dissect sustainable agriculture issues at a deep enough. The practical result is a series of documentary vignettes, along with adjusted packaging design with quotes from authors talking about food and sustainability issues.

In 2011, Chipotle created one of its most notable content marketing ads: a two-minute animated short film, "[Back to the Start](#)". The short, with music by Willie Nelson, traces the story arch of a farmer developing and expanding his operations to include more industrial equipment and practices, but ultimately opting to revert his farm back to simpler, healthier practices. The film is a brand narrative piece that addresses issues central to Chipotle's commitment to sustainable agriculture and food with integrity.

In 2013, the company followed "Back to the Start" and increased awareness of its "Food with Integrity" commitment with a mobile game and accompanying short film, both titled "[The Scarecrow](#)." The short, featuring music by Fiona Apple, aims to expose the disadvantages of conventional farming practices through the exploits of the eponymous protagonist, a

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scarecrow, who is troubled by what he sees at his job in a dramatized food factory. The short serves as a promotion for an iOS game of the same name in which the player helps guide the Scarecrow to “bring real food back.” The overall goal was to engage the company’s customers actively and explicitly, as a step up from “Back to the Start”.

Then, in another unusual yet delightful move, Chipotle also teamed up with Hulu to create an original TV show series titled “[Farmed and Dangerous](#),” a satire on the pitfalls and dangers of conventional agriculture, or as Chipotle bravely puts it, “the outrageously twisted and utterly unsustainable world of industrial agriculture”. The characters and plot reflect the company’s position on sustainable agriculture and the series enables the company to find yet another deep level of engagement. As Mark Crumpacker, Chipotle’s Chief Marketing and Development Officer, asserts, “‘Farmed and Dangerous’ [is] a [values-integration](#) rather than typical *product-integration*. The show addresses issues that [Chipotle] thinks are important – albeit in a satirical way – without being explicitly about Chipotle. This approach allows [Chipotle] to produce content that communicates [its] values and entertains people at the same time.”

Chipotle has also effectively utilized other online platforms, particularly social media, which have been instrumental in allowing the company to engage directly with customers in a personal, one-on-one way. Through direct engagement, the company has been able to address questions, educate people on an individual level, and take the discussion just as far as an individual is willing or ready to go.

## Results

Chipotle’s content marketing work has proven both provocative and effective in creating genuine and direct engagement with its customers. The company’s two shorts, “Back to the Start” and “The Scarecrow” have won multiple advertising awards and have helped spark conversations about agriculture and industrial food production in entertaining, thought-provoking ways. Following the early success of “Back to the Start”, Chipotle sought to expand its audience and so the company put it on 10,000 movie screens around the country. Customers and sustainability food supporters reacted very positively to it while BigAg did not – which as Christopher Arnold, PR Director, described as “[the perfect trifecta for us.](#)” Chipotle also ran “Back to the Start” at the 2012 Grammy music awards, resulting in close to 200 million impressions in the span of several weeks. This put the short in the pantheon of



Super Bowl advertising – with the important difference that Chipotle did not have to share advertising space with any other company.

While it can be notoriously difficult to attribute business outcomes to specific marketing efforts, it does appear the brand has enjoyed some considerable returns on these unique content marketing efforts. In the same quarter as the release of “Back to the Start”, system-wide sales were up 25.8% (23.4% for the year) and market share grew nearly 3 percentage points. “The Scarecrow” was viewed 5.5 million times in the first week, to date totaling over 500 million media impressions, a result that would have cost the company an estimated \$7 million, had it been delivered via paid TV spots rather than via YouTube. Not only did “The Scarecrow” earn remarkable exposure for the money, but some of the 15% increase in same-quarter profit and 20.3% increase in sales can surely be attributed to that campaign.