

1.1 Buffalo Wild Wings: Fueling the Sports Fan Experience

"Wings. Beer. Sports." That's the long-standing motto for the fast-growing Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant chain. "B-Dubs"—as it's known to avid regulars—focuses on food and sports and "everything in between."

There's no doubt about it. Buffalo Wild Wings more than lives up to the "wings" and "beer" parts of the equation. It serves up wings in an abundant variety: boned or boneless, with five dry seasonings and 17 signature sauces ranging on the heat scale from Sweet BBQ (traditional BBQ sauce: satisfyingly sweet with no heat) to Desert Heat (smoky, sweet, and chili pepper seasoning) to Reformulated Blazin' (so good, it's scary—made with the unrelenting heat of the ghost pepper). To wash it all down, each B-Dubs restaurant pours as many as 30 different draft beers, with a full selection of domestic, import, and craft beer brands. You won't go hungry or thirsty at B-Dubs.

However, the Buffalo Wild Wings recipe for success goes much deeper than just selling wings and beer for profit. What really packs 'em in and keeps 'em coming back is the B-Dubs customer *experience*. Customers do gobble up the wings—more than 11 million wings chain-wide on last Super Bowl Sunday alone. But even more important, they come to B-Dubs to watch sports, trash talk, cheer on their sports teams, and meet old friends and make new ones—that is, a total eating and social experience. "We realize that we're not just in the business of selling wings," says the company. "We're something much bigger. We're in the business of fueling the sports fan experience. Our mission is to WOW people every day!"

Everything about B-Dubs is designed to deliver the ultimate sports experience, for any fan of any sport. The WOW begins the minute you step into any of Buffalo Wild Wings's 1,100 restaurants. This is not your average dark-and-dank sports bar. Instead, a B-Dubs is like a miniature stadium, with high ceilings, ample natural light, and brightly colored furnishings and wall coverings. The newest Buffalo Wild Wings "Stadia" restaurants are divided into barrier-free zones—including a bar area and a separate dining area. And every B-Dubs has 60 to 70 really big flat-screen TVs lining the walls, over the bar, and about everywhere else, ensuring that every table has the best seat in the house

no matter what your team or sport, including live streaming of local college and even high school events. B-Dubs creates an exciting environment that makes it the next best thing to being at the game—or something even better. "We consider ourselves to have 1,100 stadiums," says the chain's vice president for guest experience and innovation.

There's an experience for everyone at Buffalo Wild Wings. The chain appeals to a wide range of customers, from pub-loving sports nuts to families looking for an affordable evening out. Singles and couples gravitate to the bar area; families stick to the carpeted areas with booths. In addition to streaming sports events of all kinds on the big screens, B-Dubs supplies tableside tablets upon which customers can play poker or trivia games. A social jukebox feature lets guests control the music that plays on the restaurant's sound system.

It seems like there's always something happening in a B-Dubs to engage customers and enhance the experience. Take the chain's infamous Blazin' Wing Challenge—which promises a trophy-style T-shirt and a place on the Wall of Fame to any customer who can down a dozen wings with the chain's hottest signature sauce in no more than six minutes. That's no easy feat considering that the Blazin' sauce

is 60 times hotter than typical jalapeño sauce. During the six-minute binge, challengers are not allowed to use napkins or utensils, touch their faces, or eat or drink anything other than the wings (no dipping sauces, please). The menu boasts plenty of warnings, and servers advise most people not to even attempt the challenge. And before taking the plunge, each challenger signs a waiver agreeing that he or she "voluntarily assumes all risk of loss, damage, injury, illness, or death that may be sustained by him or her as a result." As you can imagine, when a challenge is announced over the PA, it usually draws a crowd.

Buffalo Wild Wings never rushes its guests. Whereas many other casual-dining restaurants have a "turn-and-burn" philosophy—cycling as many paying guests as possible through each table—at B-Dubs it's just the opposite. Buffalo Wild Wings encourages people to linger longer, enjoy the food, and soak up the ambiance.

To help make that happen, the chain has created a new staff position at each restaurant. In addition to the usual waitstaff, each table has a "Guest Experience Captain." According to B-Dubs's chief marketer, the captain is "like a host at any party," moving from table to table, chatting with guests, personalizing their experiences, and making sure their needs are met. Want a special



Customer-focused mission: The Buffalo Wild Wings mission is to provide a total eating and social environment that "fuels the sports fan experience" through in-store and online engagement.

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game on one screen with another game on the screen next to it? Your Guest Experience Captain sees to it. Need help with a tablet? Your captain lends a hand. Want to try some new sauces? Your captain will make suggestions and even bring out samples of different sauces with complimentary fries for dipping.

Adding Guest Experience Captains is a major expense, especially when multiplied across shifts in all 1,100 stores. But Buffalo Wild Wings reasons that the captains will more than pay for themselves by enhancing the all-important guest experience, keeping customers around longer, and bringing them back more often. Buffalo Wild Wings restaurants with captains are achieving record levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty compared with those that have not yet brought captains on board. "It's just an opportunity for us to go a little deeper with the community than our competitors," says the B-Dubs marketing chief.

True to its "ultimate sports experience" mission, Buffalo Wild Wings actively engages its customers digitally and socially outside its restaurants as well as inside. In fact, the company brags that it's the number-one

brand in its industry for digital fan engagement. B-Dubs's very active website draws 3 million visitors per month. The brand has more than 12 million Facebook fans, 660,000 Twitter followers, and very active YouTube and Instagram pages. It recently launched GameBreak, an app for fantasy football and other games that can be played inside or outside its restaurants. According to the company's customer experience executive, GameBreak players visit more often, stay longer, and tend to "buy that second or third beer or maybe one more basket of wings." In all, Buffalo Wild Wings creates a host of both in-store and online promotions that inspire camaraderie. "It's about giving [customers]

tools to not just be spectators but advocates of the brand," says the chain.

Catering to the customer experience has paid big dividends for Buffalo Wild Wings. B-Dubs is now the nation's number-one seller of chicken wings and largest pourer of draft beer. Over the past five years, as other casual-dining restaurants have struggled with fierce competition and slow growth, B-Dubs's sales have more than tripled and profits are up 250 percent. The chain's "hottest wing coating available comes with a warning to B-Dubs' customers: 'keep away from eyes, pets, and children.' The sauce is called 'Blazin,'" says one analyst. "That term also happens to be a good description of the stock's performance lately."

Sources: Demitrios Kalogeropoulos, "Why Buffalo Wild Wings Is Spending More on Its Employees," *The Motley Fool*, June 24, 2015, www.fool.com/investing/general/2015/06/24/why-buffalo-wild-wings-is-spending-more-on-its-emp.aspx; Demitrios Kalogeropoulos, "3 Reasons Buffalo Wild Wings Can Keep Soaring in 2015," *The Motley Fool*, January 9, 2015, www.fool.com/investing/general/2015/01/09/3-reasons-why-buffalo-wild-wings-can-keep-soaring.aspx; Bryan Gruley, "The Sloppy Empire: How Buffalo Wild Wings Turned the Sports Bar into a \$1.5 Billion Juggernaut," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, April 13–19, 2015, pp. 62–65; Tanya Dua, "The Buffalo Wild Wings Recipe for the 'Ultimate Sports Experience,'" August 4, 2015, <http://digiday.com/brands/buffalo-wild-wings-recipe-ultimate-sports-experience/>; and <http://ir.buffalowildwings.com/financials.cfm> and www.buffalowildwings.com/en/, accessed September 2016.

Exchanges and Relationships

Marketing occurs when people decide to satisfy their needs and wants through exchange relationships. **Exchange** is the act of obtaining a desired object from someone by offering something in return. In the broadest sense, the marketer tries to bring about a response to some market offering. The response may be more than simply buying or trading products and services. A political candidate, for instance, wants votes; a church wants membership and participation; an orchestra wants an audience; and a social action group wants idea acceptance.

Marketing consists of actions taken to create, maintain, and grow desirable exchange relationships with target audiences involving a product, service, idea, or other object. Companies want to build strong relationships by consistently delivering superior customer value. We will expand on the important concept of managing customer relationships later in the chapter.

Markets

The concepts of exchange and relationships lead to the concept of a market. A **market** is the set of actual and potential buyers of a product or service. These buyers share a particular need or want that can be satisfied through exchange relationships.

Marketing means managing markets to bring about profitable customer relationships. However, creating these relationships takes work. Sellers must search for and engage buyers, identify their needs, design good market offerings, set prices for them, promote them, and store and deliver them. Activities such as consumer research, product development, communication, distribution, pricing, and service are core marketing activities.

Although we normally think of marketing as being carried out by sellers, buyers also carry out marketing. Consumers market when they search for products, interact with companies to obtain information, and make their purchases. In fact, today's digital technologies, from online sites and smartphone apps to the explosion of social media, have empowered consumers and made marketing a truly two-way affair. Thus, in addition to customer relationship management, today's marketers must also deal effectively with *customer-managed relationships*. Marketers are no longer asking only "How can we influence our customers?" but also "How can our customers influence us?" and even "How can our customers influence each other?"

Exchange

The act of obtaining a desired object from someone by offering something in return.

Market

The set of all actual and potential buyers of a product or service.