

CULTURE STILL BEATS KIOSKS

WHAT CHICK-FIL-A UNDERSTANDS THAT MCDONALD'S IS STILL LEARNING

Authored by Ed Murphy; published July 15, 2025

The 2025 ACSI report reveals what many QSRs would rather ignore: customer satisfaction is slipping, and efficiency alone won't fix it.

While Chick-fil-A has once again claimed the top spot in customer satisfaction—its 11th consecutive year—legacy brands like KFC, Sonic, Five Guys, and McDonald's have seen measurable declines.

At first glance, these score changes may seem minor. But they point to a deeper issue: many established brands are optimizing for efficiency and technology at the expense of the holistic customer experience.

Customer Satisfaction: More Than Food and Speed

Today's customer satisfaction is about more than just food quality or speed. It's about how well a brand aligns technology, training, and culture to create a consistent, emotionally resonant, and human-centered experience—especially now, when dining out is increasingly seen as a luxury rather than a routine.

Why Chick-fil-A Leads the Pack

Chick-fil-A's high satisfaction scores aren't just the result of well-executed operations. They reflect a deeper, organization-wide commitment to people, purpose, and culture.

Training Built on Empowerment and Culture

Chick-fil-A's onboarding process is immersive, emphasizing hands-on mentorship, collaborative learning, and shadowing—not just technical skill-building. Leadership development is available at all levels, and training is personalized to role, tenure, and development stage. Employees are taught not just what to do, but why it matters, fostering a sense of ownership and pride.

Technology That Enhances, Not Replaces

Digital tools at Chick-fil-A are designed to support employees, not replace them. While mobile ordering and drive-thru innovations streamline the customer experience, the focus remains on maintaining a human connection. Technology is thoughtfully integrated to free up staff for more meaningful interactions, not to eliminate the need for them.

Servant Leadership at Scale

Franchisees and leaders are trained in a servant-leadership model, empowering teams to take ownership of the guest experience. This support-first mindset translates into more engaged employees and, in turn, more satisfied customers.

Where Other QSRs Are Falling Behind

McDonald's: Cost Over Service—A Strategic Trade-off

McDonald's offers one of the most comprehensive training infrastructures in the industry, built for scale, consistency, and career development. However, this emphasis on standardization can come at the expense of personalization and culture-building. Employees are often trained to follow procedures rather than empowered to create moments of delight.

In recent years, McDonald's has heavily invested in AI-powered ordering, kiosks, and digital platforms to boost efficiency. These moves are primarily driven by a focus on cost reduction and margin improvement:

- **Labor Cost Reduction:** Self-service kiosks and AI-driven systems have enabled McDonald's to significantly reduce labor costs and operate with fewer front-line staff. Some locations report labor cost reductions of 10–15% and a decrease in headcount, as kiosks now handle a large share of orders. (Restaurant Dive, June 2025)
- **Margin Improvement:** Automation supports McDonald's cost leadership strategy, helping maintain profitability amid rising wages. Kiosks and digital ordering also increase average ticket sizes and improve order accuracy, further supporting margins.
- **Investor and Franchisee Appeal:** These efficiencies are applauded by investors and franchisees for boosting profitability and stock value, even if they risk alienating some customers.

However, these innovations come with trade-offs. While automation has improved speed and consistency, it sometimes comes at the expense of meaningful human interaction. When employees are reduced to system stewards and customers are nudged toward self-service, the warmth and emotional connection of the experience can diminish. Customers who prefer personal service or are less comfortable with technology may feel alienated, leading to frustration and, in some cases, lost business. Over time, this focus on cost over service can erode loyalty and long-term brand value.

Recognizing these challenges, McDonald's has recently created the role of Chief Restaurant Experience Officer—a clear signal that the brand is refocusing on the end-to-end customer journey. Led by Jill McDonald, this new team is tasked with integrating operations, technology, and culture to better align with evolving customer expectations. (McDonald's Corporate Press Release, April 2025). While it's a promising step, the challenge remains: can McDonald's bring the same level of emotional engagement and empowerment to its frontline teams as Chick-fil-A?

Takeaways for QSR Leaders

High satisfaction isn't about being the fastest or cheapest. It's about being the most aligned—in your tech, training, culture, and customer experience.


When satisfaction scores slip, it's not always because something broke. Sometimes it's because other brands are building better.

What's Working:

- **Rethink Value Beyond Discounts:** Stop relying on promotional pricing as a primary differentiator. Instead, elevate perceived value through better service, smoother experiences, and personalized care.
- **Balance Technology and Humanity:** Use tech to support employees, not replace them. Prioritize seamless escalation and assisted service, not just automation.
- **Reframe Training as Culture, Not Just Compliance:** Invest in training that goes beyond task completion. Focus on leadership, empowerment, and values-driven behaviors.
- **Put Employees at the Center of Experience Design:** Empower frontline teams with decision-making authority, feedback channels, and opportunities for growth.
- **Measure What Actually Drives Satisfaction:** Don't just track speed and accuracy. Include emotional drivers, such as trust, care, and consistency, in your CX measurement models.

The QSR brands that succeed in today's market are those that view customer experience as a holistic discipline—one that integrates technology, training, and culture to create memorable, emotionally resonant moments for both customers and employees. As the bar continues to rise, legacy brands must move beyond efficiency and embrace true CX transformation to stay relevant.

Are you building efficiency—or loyalty? The difference is in the design.

If you're rethinking how to balance speed with soul in your service model—we'd love to share what we're seeing work. [Let's talk.](#) 

About the Author

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Ed has achieved a very successful career by building relationships and providing innovative solutions to meet clients' needs. With over thirty years as a global researcher, management consultant, and business leader, Ed brings his experience, expertise, and passion to every consulting assignment.

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