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Analyzing an Unconventional Success Story Chick-fil-A Fast Food Restaurants in the USA

1. Introduction

Chick-fil-A, Inc. is one of the most popular and successful fast-food restaurant companies in the United States. Moreover, the company has achieved this status despite a number of unusual management practices—several of which would seem to be disadvantages. This paper describes and analyzes the practices, along with analysis of some external trends affecting the company in recent years. The goal is to identify a set of key factors that have contributed to the company's rather unlikely success.

To date, the author has not found such a comprehensive analysis of the Chick-fil-A phenomenon in the scholarly management literature. Some comprehensive "overview" articles about Chick-fil-A can be found in the popular business media, but the articles tend to be brief and sparsely documented. Therefore, this paper is presented as a first step toward a well-informed, general understanding of a subject that is worth further study: namely, how an unconventional company has managed to prosper in a highly competitive retail market.

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The research method was to collect and digest information from secondary sources. These sources include news reports, industry surveys, and U.S. government statistics, along with materials posted on the web by Chick-fil-A executives, employees and customers, and by independent observers and consultants. Prior academic research is cited where relevant, although as noted, the body of research specific to Chick-fil-A is not extensive.

The paper is organized as follows:
- first, some context on the American fast-food industry, and the history and current status of Chick-fil-A,
- a brief descriptive list of several of the company's unconventional practices, with a focus on those that appear to be drawbacks or limiting factors,
- a review of the literature comes next, including both scholarly and news-media sources,
- then a series of sections on Chick-fil-A practices that are posited as probable "success factors" for the company, including some of those mentioned as apparent drawbacks,
- a brief concluding section includes possible areas for further research.

2. The U.S. Fast Food Industry and Chick-fil-A

Fast-food restaurants—usually called quick-service restaurants or QSRs within the industry—have been defined as retail outlets featuring a "limited menu, precooked or quickly prepared food, and take-out operations." (American Marketing Association, n.d.) Establishments of this kind have existed in many countries for centuries. Classic examples would include the food vendors' stalls at open-air marketplaces, and the roadside stands called warungs in Indonesia. (Kraig & Taylor Sen, eds., 2013) However in the United States after the Second World War, fast-food service became systematized and industrialized at scale. Companies like McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's each began as single restaurants and then expanded, during the postwar decades, into chain-store enterprises with widespread locations. Typically the locations were owned and operated by franchisees, who bought from the parent company the rights to use its corporate-approved menus, equipment, restaurant designs and procedures, and who also benefited from the corporation's marketing and advertising. (See for example Gross, 1997, a brief history of the McDonald's company and the industry.)

Chick-fil-A—pronounced with a long A, to mimic to how Americans would say "chick filet"—began in a similar manner, though with important differences emerging along the way. In 1946, founder S. Truett Cathy, a recently discharged U.S. Army veteran, teamed with his brother to open a small restaurant in Hapeville, a town in the American state of Georgia. Cathy chose the site because Ford Motor Company was building a production plant nearby, which promised a steady flow of customers from the workforce. The busy workers often wanted their food in a hurry, and as Cathy learned that they especially liked a sandwich made with breaded and fried chicken, he developed a method to prepare it quickly. Eventually the sandwich would become Chick-fil-A's core menu item. But franchising and expansion did not begin until 1967, as Cathy wished to avoid borrowing heavily or bringing in passive investors to finance growth. Once launched, however, the Chick-fil-A chain grew steadily, returning profits every year (Cathy, S.T., 2002).

The company now has restaurants throughout most of North America. To summarize Chick-fil-A's recent financial results briefly: Total sales through its approximately 2,500 franchised and company-operated restaurants were US$13.7 billion in 2020, an increase of 12.7% over the previous year, even though the Covid-19 pandemic depressed businesses and spending from mid-March of 2020 onward. Revenue flowing to the corporation in 2020 was $4.3 billion, a year-on-year increase of 13%, and comprehensive earnings were $715.9 million, an increase of 10.6%. These results were achieved while increasing subsidies to franchise operators to help them cope with the pandemic (Restaurant Finance Monitor, 2021).

Chick-fil-A generally enjoys a reputation for stellar, above-and-beyond customer service, and for superior food including chicken sandwiches, chicken strips, and nuggets with the company's signature sauces. For example, in a 2019 Business Insider article that compared Chick-fil-A to a rapidly expanding competitor, the Raising Cane's chicken restaurant chain, the Chick-fil-A experience was judged to be overwhelmingly more positive. While this was just one author's subjective view, it has been echoed in nationwide statistics.

Chick-fil-A ranked number one in customer satisfaction in the USA's quick service restaurant (QSR) category in 2021, according to the widely used American Customer Satisfaction Index. (Lock, 2021) In the 2021 Corporate Reputation survey conducted by The Harris Poll, Chick-fil-A ranked fourth in positive reputation among the 100 "most visible" companies across all industries. (Axios/Harris Poll, 2021) In MBLM's Brand Intimacy survey, which purports to measure the emotional attachment that customers feel toward a company's brand, Chick-fil-A ranked first among QSRs and 10th among U.S. companies of all kinds. Chick-fil-A also scored far above average in MBLM's measure of “price resilience,” which reflects the willingness of customers to pay more for a company’s products or services. (Plapler, 2019) And in a more tangible measure—actual average sales volume, per restaurant location—the company exceeds major competitors by a wide margin. For example, “the average Chick-fil-A unit made around $4,090,900 in 2017. By contrast, the total combined sales for McDonald’s ($2,670,320 per unit), Starbucks ($945,270) and Subway ($416,860) is $4,032,450” (entrepreneur.com). These results are made to seem even more impressive when one considers the potential obstacles and limitations that Chick-fil-A has imposed on itself.

3. Unconventional Practices; Apparent Drawbacks

One salient quality of fast food in the United States is the familiarity or sameness of the restaurants across the states. A Chick-fil-A in Kentucky is much the same as one in Pennsylvania. Further, many of the major chains do not appear to differ from each other very much in terms of the menu offerings, the quality of the food, or the nature and quality of the customer experience. One might compare a Burger King to a McDonald’s or a Wendy’s and find little to distinguish one from another, either in formal surveys or by personal visits. However, as this paper has begun to show and will further demonstrate, there is a distinct difference between any of these mentioned and Chick-fil-A. Many people cite the cheerful staff, the efficiency of the drive-through despite lines that wrap around the building, and the perceived quality of the food. In this section, the philosophical and operating differences of the Chick-fil-A corporation are previewed by briefly highlighting five corporate policies that stand out, both for their distinctiveness and the fact that they may seem like negatives, but have combined to form a successful business model for the company.

Chick-fil-A restaurants are closed on Sundays. This would appear to be a major obstacle, as virtually all other retail chains in the U.S. are open seven days per week, and many Chick-fil-A stores are located in or near shopping malls, which tend to be busy on weekends. With a distinct Christian leaning, there is also the dollars of the after-church crowd to consider. Rather than the traditional Sunday dinner, much of the post-church crowd chooses to dine out following services. Sunday is also a higher volume travel day compared with weekdays, and many people are more likely to prefer a fast-food option when travelling. In 2019, *Business Insider* reported that if the restaurants were open on Sundays, with similar volume to other days of the week, they could make an estimated additional $1.2 billion per year. Chick-fil-A aficionados seem willing to go out of their way to visit the other six days of the week. In fact, they will often cite a craving on Saturday or Monday due to the fact they couldn't get their favorite menu item for 24 hours. Yet despite losing 14% (1/7) of its potential selling time, Chick-fil-A consistently leads the American fast food industry in sales volume per store (Lock, 2020).

The only meat on the day-long menu is chicken. (Chick-fil-A now includes some bacon and sausage items in its breakfast menu.) This is a departure from the classic fast-food formula in the U.S. The largest chains—which include Subway sandwich shops and the Mexican-themed Taco Bell, along with the hamburger-centric trio of McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's—serve beef and beef- or pork-based items throughout the day, in addition to chicken sandwiches and other chicken meals. Many regional chains do the same; many are now adding vegetarian burgers as well. One exception is KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), an older and larger chain than Chick-fil-A, which entered the franchising business in 1952 as a chicken-focused player. But KFC now draws increasing shares of its revenue from outside the U.S.—by the 2010s, it had become the largest restaurant chain in China (Bell & Shelman, 2011)—and in China and elsewhere, KFC expands and tailors its menus to suit national tastes (Thomas, 2018).

Chick-fil-A operates only in the United States and parts of Canada. The other major U.S.-based fast food chains operate globally or at least overseas. McDonald's and Subway each have a presence in over 100 countries. Chick-fil-A opened a pilot store in Reading, England in 2019 but closed the operation after only six months (Duffy, 2020).

Chick-fil-A is privately owned, by the family of the founder. S. Truett Cathy, before his death, passed leadership of the company to his son Dan, and made his heirs sign an agreement that they would never take the company public. (Duprey, 2021) This is remarkable, given that an IPO (initial public offering) has long been seen as a classic mechanism by which growing companies raise capital for further growth. (Fernando, 2021) All other major U.S. fast-food chains are either listed on stock exchanges, or are owned by publicly listed holding companies such as Yum! Brands (See for example Yum! Brands, n.d.).

Chick-fil-A has an explicitly religious corporate mission statement and culture. The "corporate purpose," as stated on the Chick-fil-A website, is "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A." (Chick-fil-A, 2021a) This religious basis is the reason for the restaurants being closed on Sundays. The late founder was a member of a Baptist Christian church that emphasizes strict adherence to principles stated in the Bible (First Baptist Jonesboro, 2021). The company's faith-based orientation appears to be a positive influence in a number of ways, but has also led to a public relations issue. In 2012, soon-to-be-CEO Dan Cathy said during media interviews that he opposed same-sex marriage, on biblical grounds. These statements, along with further revelations, triggered a long-running controversy in which LGBTQ groups and sympathetic individuals have boycotted Chick-fil-A while others support and patronize the company. The issue will be examined in more depth later in this paper.

4. Review of the Literature

Academic research studies of Chick-fil-A are not numerous to begin with, and many that exist have focused either on the above-mentioned public relations issue or on the company's Christian orientation. This section presents a brief sampling of the various kinds of works available. Kim et al (2017), running a controlled online simulation of the time when the PR crisis arose, found that social-media users were more likely to change their opinion of the Chick-fil-A brand when provided with objective information about the company's position rather than with counter-arguments. Lowe (2013), studying the ethical arguments raised on both sides of the dispute, noted that protestors used the slogan "It's not about the chicken" when, ironically, neither side addressed the ethical implications of eating factory-farmed chickens.

A doctoral dissertation in the early 2000s (Ventura, 2006) found evidence that the Christian-based Chick-fil-A company indeed promoted Christian values such as "love" and "justice" in both its internal and external business dealings. The author also noted that although cause and effect could not be established, Chick-fil-A had avoided illegal business behaviors and scandals of the kinds discovered at numerous other U.S. corporations of the time. Taylor (2020), using Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory in a study of Chick-fil-A franchise operators, found that high relational orientation in these managers correlated with high levels of employee engagement at their restaurants.

As for taking a comprehensive view of the company's success: In 2013, the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business published a teaching case study of Chick-fil-A. Key factors examined in the case study were the company's relatively slow-growth strategy, which includes aversion to debt, and the simplicity of the menu, which allegedly makes good food easy to prepare, even with a non-expert kitchen staff. (Simko et al, 2013) There have been non-scholarly articles in the business media which attempt to comprehensively explain Chick-fil-A's success, but many of these are short bullet-point-style articles, and many are good in terms of factual accuracy but not always rigorously thought out. For instance a 2018 article in *Entrepreneur* magazine listed eight success factors for Chick-fil-A, some of which appear to be duplicative. One notable takeaway from the *Entrepreneur* list is phrased in the form of advice to startup-minded readers: "Start small, seek feedback and perfect your craft." The author points out that S. Truett Cathy spent 21 years operating a single restaurant before he spun it out into the Chick-fil-A chain, which gave him ample time to learn details of the restaurant business, refine the menu, and experiment with fast-food preparation techniques (Patel, 2018).

At least two Chick-fil-A executives have authored books about their experiences with the company. Founder S. Truett Cathy released the autobiographical Eat Mor Chikin: Inspire More People in 2002, along with later follow-up volumes; and former chief marketing officer Steve Robinson released Covert Cows and Chick-fil-A: How Faith, Cows, and Chicken Built an Iconic Brand in 2019. The books are useful background reading but dwell heavily on the faith-based aspects of the men's business and personal lives; in fact, Robinson's book was published by Thomas Nelson, a publisher of Christian books and Bibles.

Finally, there are scholarly studies of consumer preferences for fast foods in general. A landmark U.S.-wide survey by Glanz et al (1998) reported five factors influencing consumers' choice of both fast foods and at-home foods, to varying degrees: taste, cost, convenience, nutrition, and weight control. Years later, in a U.S. government-funded study, Rahkovsky et al (2018) found preference for "convenience foods" (including fast foods) driven by socioeconomic factors such as time constraints and household budget.

Taken together, these studies do not suggest any clear outline of the "winning ingredients" that might have been behind Chick-fil-A's rise to prominence. The next section examines some key possibilities.

5. Possible and Probable Success Factors

In each of the following ways, Chick-fil-A has differentiated itself from much of the rest of the American fast food industry. And in each, it is possible that the company has thereby gained a degree of competitive advantage, in some cases turning apparent negatives to positives.

5.1. Franchising Approach: Hands-on Management Required

Like many other QSRs, Chick-fil-A's business model is based on franchising opportunities, where unique owner-operators apply to expand the chain into new locations. However the company's approach to franchising is different in several respects. The fee to obtain a franchise is very low, at this writing only \$10,000. Nor does a new franchisee need to pay much in additional startup costs, as Chick-fil-A provides—and owns—the building, grounds, and equipment. However in exchange for this generosity, each franchisee is required to actually manage and operate the restaurant, as opposed to being merely the owner of a revenue-producing business. (Chick-fil-A, 2021b) In other franchise chains, a single person or company may own dozens or even hundreds of restaurants, hiring managers to run them. (See for example Pritchard, 2020 and Arcos Dorados, 2021.) Furthermore, Chick-fil-A is extremely selective in choosing franchisees, typically accepting only a fraction of 1 percent of all who apply. (Siegel, 2018) The business model expects these owner-operators "and their families [to] become integrated in their local communities … [and] give back outside of their restaurants as well." (Chick-fil-A, 2021b) This emphasis on building relationships and sharing goodwill seems to elevate the business of fast-food chicken to a higher calling, and it is reasonable to infer that Chick-fil-A's explicit statement of these principles helps to attract the type of people with whom the company is looking to partner.

Among those who have a complementary philosophy of business, the low fee expands the potential talent pool. It allows the company to consider candidates who have done reasonably well at earning money but who are far from wealthy. The requirement to manage the restaurant draws people who are seeking engagement in the business as a career, not as an investment, and it appears to be associated with continuity of management at the franchises. In the 1990s, after two decades of operation at scale, Chick-fil-A's annual turnover rate of franchise operators was only about 5%—well below the industry average of about 35% (Dobrzynski, 1996)—and the figure remained at or below 5% well into the 2000s. (Schmall, 2007) The rigorous selection process includes several months of interviews combined with on-the-job performance evaluation at an existing franchise. It narrows the field to franchisees who fit the company's culture as well as showing promise. (Schmall, 2007 and Rossino, 2018)

Chick-fil-A's franchising approach has a major downside for the potential franchisee. Because Chick-fil-A retains ownership of the restaurant, the franchise operator never acquires equity in the business and cannot sell it at a profit or pass it on to heirs; the operator earns money only from a share of the revenues. (Gerhardt et al, 2015) However the company explicitly states that

Franchising [with Chick-fil-A] is not an opportunity for passive financial investment, working from the sidelines, or adding to a portfolio of business ventures. This business opportunity is a hands-on, life investment … Chick-fil-A Franchisees run their own incredibly complex businesses, ultimately in charge of all aspects of the restaurant. Their success and return on investment are proportionate to their hard work, business acumen and leadership effectiveness. (Chick-fil-A, 2021b)

Some observers have concluded that the franchising approach is one of the keys to Chick-fil-A's success, as it indeed tends to select operators who make long-term commitments to sound restaurant management (see for example Hoogoveen, 2020 and Dahms, 2021).

5.2. Freedom Within Structure

Franchise operators also are given considerable degrees of autonomy. Although they must follow strict procedures in preparing the food, and must enforce the company's basic principles of customer service, they are encouraged to develop their own management style and to innovate in other ways as they see fit (Dahms, 2021). This general philosophy has been called "freedom within structure" or "freedom within a framework." As explained in Harvard Business Review, it is a means of maintaining top-down discipline while also tapping the creative abilities of people in the organization (Gulati, 2018).

The freedoms granted to Chick-fil-A franchise operators can be illustrated by the case of an operator known for taking full advantage of them: Arthur Greeno of Tulsa, Oklahoma. One of the few franchisees granted permission to manage two Chick-fil-A outlets, Greeno has won public notice mainly for his regional marketing efforts. To promote his restaurants, he has organized public festivals and special events with themes of his own choosing, such as monthly "Superhero Nights" (Greeno, 2012). To publicize drinks served at the restaurants, he recruited people from the community to set Guinness World Records by making the world's largest cups of lemonade and sweet iced tea (QSR, 2010). And when McDonald's launched a new, competing chicken sandwich, Greeno made news in the *New York Times* by posting this message on a billboard near a local McDonald's: "Trade in Any ½ Eaten Copied Sandwich and Get the Original Meal Free at Chick-fil-A" (Clifford, 2008). Greeno has self-published an autobiography, which he urges his employees to read. He also keeps a personal website and gives speeches on the business-lecture circuit, to expound his management methods. (Greeno, 2020) The methods include having an accountability partner (a friend who holds him accountable to his goals and commitments), continually learning from other businesses, and instructing employees to commit “intentional acts of kindness” every day (Tramel, 2017).

While Greeno has put himself constantly in the public eye, other Chick-fil-A franchise operators have made significant innovations occasionally, as needed. A franchisee in Texas, having a restaurant with an odd physical location, combined mobile technology with new forms of worker deployment to redesign the order-taking system for drive-through service (Brownwood Bulletin, 2018). The “freedom within structure” philosophy applies to front-line employees as well. For example, workers at Chick-fil-A restaurants are empowered to give free meals to customers who appear to be having a bad day, or who are celebrating a special occasion (see for example Tramel, 2017). Employees also have liberty to be creative in relation to their work, even if it involves making fun of corporate practices. One group of young people made a mock “training video” that parodied the Chick-fil-A emphasis on customer service. The video shows the young men being forced to practice absurd service exercises to the point of exhaustion, as if they were trainees at a military boot camp. Their “Chick-fil-A Bootcamp” video has received more than 1 million views on YouTube, with the company accepting its presence online (Wallace, 2017).

5.3. Customer Service: a Focus on Human Relationship

An actual Chick-fil-A training video likewise has attracted over a million public views. Titled “Every Life Has a Story,” it consists of a short, simple scene in which actors portray customers inside a Chick-fil-A restaurant on a busy day. As the camera moves to each of a succession of people, words are flashed on the screen that briefly describe what is happening in that person’s life. A man waiting grimly in line at the counter has just lost his job; a happier-looking man has learned he is finally cancer-free. A woman seated at a table with young children is a single mother working hard to raise a family; a rebellious-looking teenager comes from a troubled home and “struggles to find acceptance and love.” Text posted underneath the video says that every customer interaction “is a chance to create a remarkable experience” for a fellow human (Cathy, D.T., 2010).

Additional Chick-fil-A training materials obtained on the web refer to customers as “guests” and tell employees to “build relationships with guests.” Since that is not easy to do in a quick-service environment, the materials encourage employees to learn "The Art of Reading Guests" and to "be sensitive to visual cues and the guest's tone of voice. Be sure to adjust your responses to each unique situation, based on [your] assessment of the situation." (CFA Properties, Inc., 2014) With this general advice in mind, employees are then told to execute the "Core 4" steps with each guest: "Create Eye Contact," "Share a Smile," "Speak with an Enthusiastic Tone," and "Stay Connected to Make It Personal … For example, connect by making small talk while preparing the beverage. Don't impede speed of service, but make each interaction hospitable rather than transactional" (CFA Properties, 2014).

Another key Chick-fil-A precept is "second mile service," which simply means going beyond what customers require or expect. The language is drawn from The Sermon on the Mount in the Christian Bible, which says, in part, "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go two with him" (Matthew 5:41). Altogether, given the high rankings in customer satisfaction and brand identification that were cited earlier in this paper, one is almost compelled to conclude that Chick-fil-A's approach to customer service pays dividends.

5.4. Employee Relations and Management of Personnel

In the journal Turističko Poslovanje (Tourism Business), Šmutović et al (2020) write that "Employee satisfaction is one of the key conditions for the success of a company." Similarly, in the Journal of Foodservice Business Research, Gordon and Parikh (2021) note that "Employees who feel supported by their organizations and managers tend to have higher well-being and job satisfaction and lower turnover." By several measures, Chick-fil-A does well at delivering job satisfaction and by at least two measures, it excels within the U.S. fast food industry.

It has been mentioned previously that the company's turnover rate of franchise managers is much lower than the industry average; the same is true for turnover rates of hourly employees at the restaurants. Since work at any fast food chain can be hectic and demanding, and the wages are at the lower end of the compensation scale, the work is often viewed as a transitional or fill-in job for younger persons, with industry-average turnover rates typically above 100% annually. Chick-fil-A's rate over the years has ranged from about 50% to 60% (See for example Dobrzynski, 1996 and Schmall, 2007).

Also, a common way to judge job satisfaction at a company is by employee reviews and ratings on public websites for that purpose. On the website Indeed.com in June of 2021, with more than 18,000 current and former employees registering their views, Chick-fil-A had an overall nationwide rating score of 4.0 out of 5 (Indeed, 2021). Subway was the next-closest major fast food chain at 3.6 and most other major QSRs scored in the 3.4 to 3.5 range. In ratings broken out by particular aspects of job satisfaction, Chick-fil-A scored substantially better than its competitors in quality of "Management" and "Culture" (Indeed, 2021).

Another job-rating website, Niche, posts employee's responses to a battery of check-the-box questions about work quality. These are published online for company locations in specific regions of the U.S. For Chick-fil-A restaurants in a suburban area of the city of Atlanta, a large American city, 520 employees responded as follows: 84% agreed or strongly agreed that "Managers care about employees." 61% chose either "Friendly" or "Fast Paced, Friendly" as best describing the company culture. 87% agreed or strongly agreed that "Taking a job here was a good decision," with only 2% registering disagreement. And 76% "believe their work helps make the world a better place" (Niche, 2021).

The last item seems remarkable for fast-food work. Apparently, however, Chick-fil-A's emphasis on personal, human-oriented customer service does help to give many employees a sense of mission. Delving deeper into employees' open-ended comments on various websites—which is difficult to do with statistical rigor, since there are immense numbers of such comments—one can at least detect noticeable trends, and this sense of mission does come up frequently. It has also been mentioned in journalistic interviews with Chick-fil-A employees, as in this example: "Part of loving people is serving them, and one of the awesome opportunities I have here is that I can help people have a better life" (Battaglia, 2008).

Frequently noted negatives about working at Chick-fil-A—both on job-rating websites and in media interviews—mostly have to do with the hectic, taxing nature of fast food service work generally. This can be a particular concern at Chick-Fil-A because the restaurants are popular and slow periods are rare. (See for example Stice, 2019a) On the positive side, it is almost universally mentioned that the workers appreciate having "flexible schedules" and having Sundays off. Even for those who do not attend a church, Sunday is a traditional day for many forms of recreation and also a day for casual socializing, since many other kinds of workers are free on Sundays as well (Stice, 2019a).

5.5. Choice of Menu as a Success Factor

Obviously, in a business that serves food to customers, the nature and quality of the food can be a key determinant of a company's success. During the course of its existence, Chick-fil-A appears to have benefited from a dramatic change in American eating habits. When the company began operating as a chain in the late 1960s, the most widely consumed meat in the U.S. was beef, by a large margin (see Figure 1). Chicken was then growing more popular but still ranked a distant third in per capita annual consumption, behind beef and pork. Over the next few decades, however, consumption of chicken (both in restaurants and in homes) continued to rise while beef-eating declined. By the early 2000s, chicken was a strong second in popularity, and by the 2010s it had become the most-produced and most-consumed meat product in the country (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021).

Observers have attributed the change to two factors: perceived healthiness, and price. From the early 1970s into the 2000s, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration passed increasingly strict rules that required nutrition labeling on foods (National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2010), and during that time, chicken has come to be seen as less fatty than beef and therefore healthier (Smil, 2019). Meanwhile, during the second half of the 20th century, industrial-scale factory farming grew common in the United States. (Natural Resources Defense Council, 2020) The practice allowed chickens to be raised in large quantities and it led to a growing cost advantage for their meat. Although chickens are much smaller than cows or pigs, they convert commercial feedstock to edible flesh more efficiently. Chickens also can be force-fed to maturity in less than two months, whereas beef cattle must be raised for much longer times before they are ready for slaughter. (Smil, 2019) In retail grocery outlets in U.S. metro areas, boneless chicken breast sold for an average of \$3.53 per pound in mid-2021, substantially less than boneless beef at an average of \$6.21 per pound and higher. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021) The difference in fast food prices is not as great, in part because fast food restaurants typically use ground beef, which is cheaper than whole beef, but the difference is still significant. In mid-2021, in the author's home state of Pennsylvania, the basic Chick-fil-A chicken sandwich sold for an average retail price of \$3.42 (Fast Food Menu Prices, 2021a), while the comparable McDonald's beef hamburger, the Big Mac, was priced at \$4.47 (Fast Food Menu Prices, 2021b).

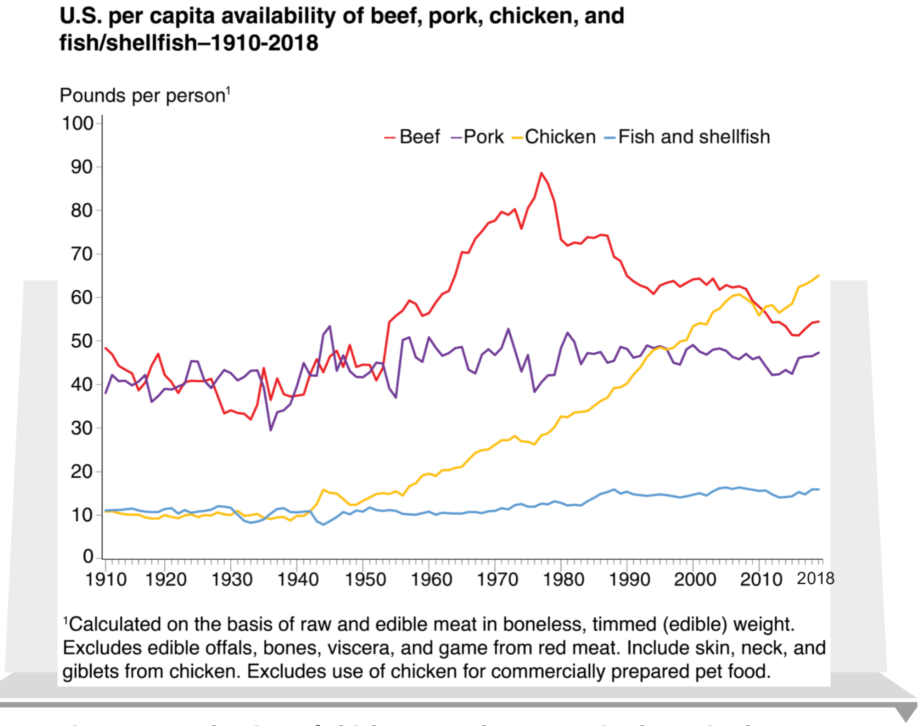

Figure 1. Production of chicken vs. other meats in the United States

Source: USDA, Economic Reasearch Service, Food Availability Data

In addition, Chick-fil-A's decision to build its menu around sandwiches has proved to be popular. There have been numerous U.S. franchise chains that specialize in chicken but the other major ones, KFC and Popeyes, have long emphasized selling cut-up pieces of fried chicken as part of a meal along with side dishes. (See for example the fried chicken menu at KFC, 2021.) The meals typically come in a box with plastic utensils, and they are literally not as easy to eat as self-contained sandwiches are. Apparently this is an important feature to American consumers of fast food, for when the Popeyes chain finally began selling a chicken sandwich in 2019, the company's quarterly sales volume rose by nearly 20% and stayed at higher levels (Maze, 2020).

Chick-fil-A's chicken sandwich has been its core offering since 1967. Over the years, the company has continued refining and expanding its varieties of chicken sandwiches until they have come to be seen, by many, as the standard against which competitors are measured (See for example Stice, 2019b.).

5.6. Private Ownership and Focus on the U.S./North American Markets

These two factors are related, as it would appear difficult for a private, family-held company to raise the very large amounts of capital needed for global expansion of a mass-market business. Founder S. Truett Cathy gave various reasons for not wishing his company ever to be taken public. He said he wanted to avoid pressures and interference from stakeholders who didn't fully understand the company or its business (Dobrzynski, 1996); he also said that the public-market imperative to maximize profits would make it hard to maintain the distinctive Chick-fil-A culture and would cut into the company's charitable giving (Severson, 2014). If his perceptions were well-founded—and if it is, in fact, beneficial to maintain deep business knowledge and a distinctive culture—then to that extent, Chick-fil-A's privately held status could be seen as an advantage.

Other U.S. fast food chains have encountered conflicts and problems after going public. KFC founder Harland Sanders famously clashed with new ownership after selling his chain to a publicly held firm, claiming, among other things, that the KFC recipes had been changed for the worse (KFC v. Sanders, 1978). Other chains, too, have had misadventures in global expansion. Notably, Wendy's has entered and then withdrawn from numerous overseas markets. (See for example University of New South Wales, n.d.) In these matters, perhaps it is best to render a tentative judgment: Staying privately owned and North America-based may give Chick-fil-A advantages in cohesiveness and simplicity of operation, but also limits the company's ultimate growth potential.

5.7. Impacts of Chick-fil-A's Religious Basis

Some scholarly studies indicate that Chick-fil-A's religious orientation and related policies may have a positive impact with certain consumer groups. Swimberghe et al (2013), surveying people in southern states of the U.S., found that "consumers with higher levels of intra-personal religious commitment are more likely to hold favorable ethical judgments of closed-on-Sunday corporate policies. In addition, favorable ethical judgments of closed-on-Sunday corporate policies are likely to positively influence corporate image." Being perceived as a faith-based company can, however, be a two-edged sword. While it is true that a substantial part of the U.S. population identifies as evangelical Christian—about 25%, according to surveys by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center—the same surveys show that Americans overall are rapidly becoming less religious and more likely to list "none" as their identified faith (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Furthermore, many Americans object strongly to conservative beliefs for which evangelical Christians and other "Bible-believing" Christians cite a Scriptural basis. This became very evident during Chick-fil-A's public relations crisis. We have touched upon the issue earlier and now let us address it in some detail. During media interviews in 2012, then-president and COO Dan Cathy made a series of comments indicating that he was opposed to same-sex marriage, which later was made legal throughout the U.S. (See for example O'Connor, 2014.) Then, shortly after the interviews, LGBTQ activists and news outlets publicized the fact that Chick-fil-A's corporate philanthropy supported various nonprofit groups deemed to have anti-gay policies and programs (O'Connor, 2012).

Public reactions were twofold. In the more politically progressive areas of the U.S. and Canada—notably in large cities and university towns—there were demonstrations and boycotts against Chick-fil-A, along with political initiatives to prevent the company from opening new restaurants in some places. Meanwhile, in more conservative areas—such as the state of Arkansas in the U.S., and the country's Southern states generally—there arose public counter-movements to support and patronize Chick-fil-A (Del Valle, 2019).

Chick-fil-A issued public statements meant to defuse the controversy and to clarify its position. In one statement the company announced that its executives would no longer comment on LGBTQ issues. The company also reaffirmed that it is an equal-opportunity employer and welcomes customers of all kinds. Over the next few years, Chick-fil-A gradually ended its funding of nearly all nonprofit groups that had been criticized as anti-gay, stating that its charity efforts would now be focused on education and youth programs (Del Valle, 2019).

It is difficult to judge the overall impact of these incidents on Chick-fil-A. Some observers have praised the company for re-thinking its practices and for acting on principles of love and tolerance, while others have criticized the company for giving in to public pressure. The controversy is no longer headline news, but there are still social-media campaigns against Chick-fil-A (as well as in its favor), urging people to avoid the restaurants or to patronize them. And although the company has continued to grow, regardless of the controversy, it is possible that growth would have been even greater without the controversy. There is some evidence on this point. In 2019, Chick-fil-A experimented with overseas expansion by opening a pilot restaurant in Reading, England. The store closed in early 2020, when its pilot lease was not renewed, and some reports indicated that “fierce” opposition from LGBTQ activist groups played a role in the closing. (Duffy, 2020) Later that year, Chick-fil-A dropped plans to open a restaurant in a major U.S. airport, after legal disputes stemming from the company’s previous stances on LGBTQ issues (Associated Press, 2020).

Perhaps the most reasonable inference to draw is that all of these events demonstrate the company’s strength and business sense. During the early stages of the PR crisis, the company’s leaders did not overreact to public criticism in a hostile manner, making the situation worse, nor did they go silent and fail to respond. And over the long term, Chick-fil-A’s financial performance and popularity rankings certainly seem to reflect a company capable of surviving a chronic public-relations issue and thriving despite the setbacks involved.

6. Chick-Fil-A’s Success versus Competitors

Just as every fast food restaurant cannot and does not achieve and sustain success over time, every family owned business is not guaranteed to work. Chick-Fil-A’s success may be attributed to the founder’s philosophy, or may be judged to be *in spite of* some of factors discussed above that separate it from its competitors. However, what seems to separate Chick-Fil-A in particular is their emphasis on customer service and giving back to the local community. When choosing a fast food restaurant, customers base their decision on price, variety of food, promotional deals, and timely service (Ehsan 2012). Chick-Fil-A remains in the top-ten largest fast food chains, and as a chicken-only restaurant surpasses all of it’s direct competition, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken, Zaxby’s, Popeye’s Louisiana Kitchen, and Raising Cane’s (see figure 2).

1. **McDonald's**: $37 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
2. **Starbucks**: $13 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
3. **Subway**: $10.8 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
4. **Burger King**: $10 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
5. **Taco Bell**: $9.8 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
6. **Wendy's**: $9.3 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
7. **Dunkin' Donuts**: $9.2 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
8. **Chick-fil-A**: $9 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
9. **Domino's**: $5.9 billion in system-wide U.S. sales
10. **Pizza Hut**: $5.5 billion in system-wide U.S. sales

Figure 2. Largest fast-food chains by revenue in the United State 2020

Source: figures reported by QSR Magazine

As discussed above, further research into Chick-fil-A in particular is warranted to determine the correlation between their business model and success factors, but Chick-fil-A consistent ranks in the top of consumer favorites. QSR Magazine ranked them as America's "favorite" brand with a Composite Loyalty index of 79 percent, the top among chicken restaurants (see figures 3 and 4).

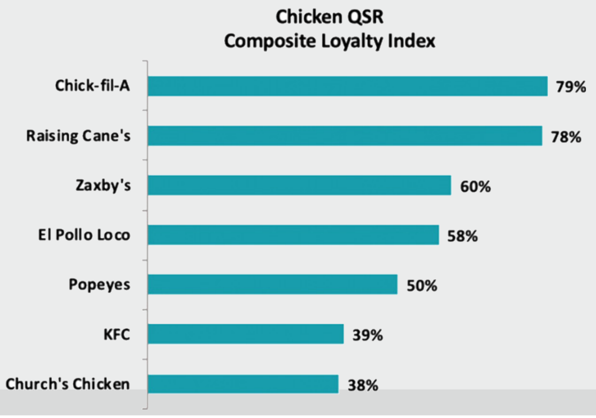

Figure 3. Composite Loyalty Index according to QSR Magazine

Source: QSR Magazine, July 2019

Popeyes	47%
El Pollo Loco	46%
KFC	42%
Church's Chicken	40%

Popeyes	47%
El Pollo Loco	45%
KFC	37%
Church's Chicken	24%

Zaxby's	59%
Popeyes	49%
Church's Chicken	39%
KFC	38%

ATMOSPHERE	
Brand	% Top Box
Raising Cane's	77%
Chick-fil-A	73%
Zaxby's	55%
El Pollo Loco	49%
Popeyes	42%
KFC	34%
Church's Chicken	26%

SPEED OF SERVICE	
Brand	% Top Box
Chick-fil-A	71%
Raising Cane's	69%
Zaxby's	49%
El Pollo Loco	48%
Popeyes	41%
KFC	39%
Church's Chicken	30%

VALUE FOR MONEY SPENT	
Brand	% Top B
Chick-fil-A	54%
Raising Cane's	52%
El Pollo Loco	49%
Zaxby's	43%
Popeyes	43%
Church's Chicken	40%
KFC	37%

Figure 4. Breakdown of factors to calculate the Composite Loyalty Index according to QSR Magazine, July 2019. Chick-fil-A tops all but one category

Source: QSR Magazine, July 2019

Though the brand is not without controversy, and the fast food industry in general faces challenges because of the number of choices, and perceived nutritional value and quality of fast food in general, there will always be a place for such establishments, and for now, Chick-fil-A remains at the top of the list.

7. Conclusions

This paper has identified five areas of management practice that appear likely to be significant contributors to Chick-fil-A's business success: the franchising approach, the "freedom within structure" philosophy, human-oriented customer service, the nature and quality of the food menu, and good employee relations. Private ownership (combined with a limited, though large, geographic market) may be a success factor in some respects. Finally, Chick-fil-A's religious orientation might best be seen as an inherent aspect of the company's culture which has advantages but also some drawbacks, and which the company manages well from a business perspective.

There are numerous potential subject areas for further research. The author has not been able to pursue them, as the present paper was an independent project, done without institutional funding and with no formal support from the university where the author is a faculty member. In terms of suggesting fruitful subjects for additional research, I would close simply by saying this: throughout the management community generally, there is growing interest in entrepreneurs and companies that succeed while being mavericks or outliers-i.e., by departing from the conventional norms of their industries. Chick-fil-A is such a company. And furthermore it is an under-studied company in this regard, getting far more attention in the popular business media than in academic research. Management researchers looking for new territory to explore might do well to consider studying Chick-fil-A, from any angle that fits their field of specialization.

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Summary

Analyzing an Unconventional Success Story
Chick-fil-A Fast Food Restaurants in the USA

The U.S. fast-food chain Chick-fil-A, Inc. has prospered financially and scored multiple rankings at or near the top of its industry by using unconventional management practices, including some that appear to be drawbacks. This paper attempts what previous academic research has not: a thorough analysis of Chick-fil-A's practices and policies, looking at how they might function as "success factors" and how the company has turned apparent disadvantages into advantages. The practices and policies include an unusual approach to franchising, a limited menu, private ownership, absence of global expansion, a distinctive focus on customer service and employee relations, and an explicitly Christian corporate culture. Chick-fil-A's success, with a business model that does not fit the mold of other fast-food chains, makes the company a promising subject for further research by anyone wishing to study unconventional forms of differentiation for competitive advantage.

Keywords: *Chick-fil-A, fast food restaurant, quick service restaurant, customer service, social media, employees and customers, American restaurants, franchised restaurant, employee satisfaction, management practice.*

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