

## What Families Look for in Fast-Casual Restaurants

Parents wish more fast-casual restaurants would offer toys or activities for their kids.

OUTSIDE INSIGHTS | DECEMBER 9, 2022 | JENNIFER LOPER



C3 BRAND MARKETING

**In addition, most fast-casual brands don't engage kids directly through packaging, messaging or entertainment. And that's a missed opportunity.**

It comes as no surprise that fast-casual restaurants are a growing segment of the restaurant industry. According to NPD Group/CREST, while overall restaurant traffic is down 4 percent in the last three years, fast-casual traffic is up 9 percent.

As fast casuals become a growth engine for the restaurant industry, we at C3 have been pondering how this important segment is engaging with its kid and family customers. To find out, we conducted research with parents and kids to hear what they want to see from fast-casual restaurants, when dining in, carrying out or in the drive-thru. Here are a few of our learnings:

### Fast Casuals have the food...

Parents would often rather go to fast-casual restaurants with their families than quick-service restaurants because they perceive it as higher quality and better-for-you, but their kids often ask for fast food instead. Why? Kids like the food and they get a toy.

### ...But lack kid-focus.

It is evident to the parents we talked to that most fast-casual restaurants don't focus on the kid and family experience. As one dad said: 'So at the end of the day, there's nothing relatable to a kid [...] If they have something specific that stands out and says "Oh, so [this fast-casual brand] does focus on kids now." Yeah, then I think they would get the [family] business.'

Even for brands that have kids' menus, they're often de-emphasized on the menu board and lacking in options. In addition, most fast-casual brands don't engage kids directly through packaging, messaging or entertainment.

And that's a missed opportunity. The lack of focus on kids is a big miss given that parties with children 12 and under bring in checks that are twice as high as parties without them<sup>3</sup>, and that can help drive a brand's revenue. One of the opportunities our research revealed is for the fast-casual segment to engage with kids directly, making their brands a go-to destination for families. The following are ways to engage families.

### Engagement Through Packaging

Not only is kids' packaging an opportunity for direct communication with young customers through kid-friendly designs, but it's also fun for them to "have their own little world in a box or a bag" (as one dad told us).

It's also easier for parents. As one mom in our study said: "Because then my kids can each have their own bag. I mean, my kids, they fight over sharing things [...] So, then we bring a bag in and they're all like rifling through it, trying to find what's theirs. If they just did individual bags like McDonald's or Chick-fil-A, it's just so much easier."

### Engagement Through Entertainment

The parents we talked to wished more fast-casual restaurants would offer toys or activities for their kids. This type of entertainment would serve three purposes:

1. To bring kids fun and joy.

"It would make [my daughter] feel pretty special."

2. To help parents have a moment of peace or relaxation while their kids are distracted and entertained.

"If I could sit there, enjoy conversation, watch my kids do something fun and new [...] then that would be, yeah, that would be really relaxing."

3. To drive additional family traffic.

"So, if they got new stickers or a new puzzle, they would still be excited to play with it at home and they would probably ask to go to that place over and over again."

At the end of the day, fast-casual brands have the opportunity to be in the family dining rotation more frequently by "checking all the boxes," as one mom said.

- Food I like
- Food my kids like
- And they get a toy

"They'd probably want to go there maybe even more than [fast food]."

*Jennifer Loper is the president of C3 Brand Marketing. She started back in 2006 as an account manager and has risen to her presidential role not only through her kind and unwavering leadership of the account management department, but also a talent bordering on super-powerful for building meaningful, lasting relationships with clients that truly see C3 as partners. C3 is known for building fully custom family and kids' programs for major restaurant and hospitality partners in the U.S. and abroad—from strategy and brand positioning, to experiential design, to designing and producing product and getting it where it needs to go.*

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