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FIVE GUYS: DEVELOPING A PROMOTIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE[[1]](#endnote-1)

Fabrizio Di Muro wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In November 2018, Five Guys, a fast-casual burger and fries restaurant chain based in the United States, faced an important decision related to its future promotion strategy. Five Guys had started in 1986 as a small company with limited resources. The company had always stayed away from traditional advertising media, such as television, radio, print, and billboard advertisements, as well as coupons. Instead, Five Guys had opted to spend its money on food and employee bonuses.[[2]](#endnote-2) However, Five Guys had grown to be a large enterprise that had experienced worldwide success — the company had more than 1,500 locations in several countries by November 2018 and had generated US$1.7 billion[[3]](#endnote-3) in sales in 2017.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The combination of the company’s massive success and the notion that companies typically spend approximately 11 per cent of their revenues on marketing budgets meant that Jerry Murrell, the founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Five Guys, had a significantly larger promotional budget at his disposal than he had in the company’s early days.[[5]](#endnote-5) With a larger promotional budget than ever before, Murrell had an opportunity to adjust and rethink the company’s promotional strategy for the future. In particular, where should Murrell allocate the company’s promotional budget?

**HISTORY OF FIVE GUYS**

**Basic Information, Product Menu, and Store Locations**

Jerry Murrell founded Five Guys, a privately held company with no financial information available, in Arlington, Virginia, in 1986. He named the company after himself, as founder, and his four sons — Matt, Jim, Chad, and Ben. After the birth of Jerry’s fifth son, Tyler, the name of the company remained unchanged, but instead reflected the five sons of the initial founder. Murrell’s sons were actively involved in running the company. Matt and Jim ran the company’s US operations, while Chad oversaw training. Ben was involved in selecting franchisees, while Tyler oversaw operations of the company’s bakeries.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Five Guys had always offered a very simple menu. In November 2018, the company offered only hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, and fries, along with a beverage assortment of Coca-Cola products and water. By November 2018, some locations offered milkshakes. The company’s burgers came in two sizes — regular (with two meat patties) and little (with one meat patty). The burgers had always been custom-made, with customers typically creating their burgers by choosing from 11 different free toppings — including lettuce, tomato, mushrooms, relish, onions, ketchup, and mustard.[[7]](#endnote-7) By November 2018, customers could create more than 250,000 different burger combinations and choose from more than 125 different soft drinks available from Coca-Cola freestyle machines. For locations that offered milkshakes, more than 1,000 combinations were available.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The company’s décor had always been very simple, yet appealing. Stores featured red and white checkered tiles, which gave the business a retro look. By November 2018, the walls were covered with awards that the company had won, as well as (positive) reviews of the company from various news outlets and newspapers. Stores also featured an open kitchen. The bags of potatoes stacked around the entrance had become an iconic staple of the company’s store layout, but the tradition had begun out of necessity, as early locations had lacked sufficient storage space in the kitchen, which led to the stacks of potatoes that were now seen at all locations. Stores also featured a chalkboard that detailed where the potatoes were grown.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In the company’s first 15 years of operation, Murrell and his family operated only five stores, all in the Washington, DC area. In 2002, Five Guys decided to franchise, despite Murrell’s objections: “My kids wanted to franchise from the start. . . . I was dead set against franchising. I didn’t think we’d be able to control the quality. That worried the heck out of me. They pulled me into it kicking and screaming.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Expansion occurred quickly. The company first expanded across Virginia, and then throughout Maryland. By 2004, Five Guys had 300 outlets operating in the northeast United States. By 2010, Five Guys had expanded to the entire United States and into Canada, and had established 570 restaurants across the two countries.[[11]](#endnote-11) Expansion continued outside of North America when a location opened at Covent Garden, in London, England in 2013.[[12]](#endnote-12) Since then, Five Guys had continued expanding overseas. The company had opened restaurants in the Middle East and in various European countries. In 2015, Five Guys opened locations in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Ireland. In 2016, the company opened its doors in Kuwait, France, and Spain. Expansion continued in 2017, as Five Guys opened stores in Qatar, Germany, and the Netherlands. Significant expansion continued in 2018, as the company opened its doors in Bahrain, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, and Switzerland. By November 2018, Five Guys had more than 1,500 locations.[[13]](#endnote-13)

**THE FAST-CASUAL INDUSTRY**

The fast-casual industry was strategically positioned between full-service restaurants and fast-food restaurants. Fast-casual restaurants focused on providing customers with high-quality food made with high-quality ingredients. In general, fast-casual establishments featured a more upscale environment than their fast-food counterparts, and typically prepared the food on site, as opposed to having it mass-produced. Similar to the practice in fast-food restaurants, fast-casual customers ordered at the counter, and table service was not offered. Prices were generally higher at fast-casual restaurants, with an average bill of $12, compared with an average bill of $5 at fast-food restaurants. In 2018, the fast-casual industry made up 7.5 per cent of the restaurant industry, which had total revenues of $800 billion. Overall, the restaurant industry’s fast-casual segment had experienced enormous compound annual growth of more than 500 per cent from 1999 to 2018. In recent years, fast-casual restaurants continued to grow quickly. This segment’s annual growth was 13.5 per cent in 2014, 10.5 per cent in 2015, 8.1 per cent in 2016, and 8.9 per cent in 2017. Fast-casual restaurants were expected to see annual growth of 7.5 per cent in 2018.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Various fast-casual chains offered a diverse variety of cuisines, including Mexican, Korean, and Vietnamese food, while others offered modern interpretations of classics such as pizza and burgers. Two major players in the US fast-casual category were Chipotle (Mexican) and Panera Bread (soup and sandwiches), which were the largest fast-casual chains in the United States.[[15]](#endnote-15) Other prominent players included Five Guys (burgers), Shake Shack (burgers), Raising Cane’s (chicken tenders), Newk’s Eatery (soup and sandwiches), The Habit Burger Grill (burgers), and Jersey Mike’s Subs (Jersey style subs). Emerging fast-casual chains included By Chloe (vegan fast-casual), Zoës Kitchen (chicken), Dickey’s Barbecue Pit (barbecue), and Smashburger (burgers).[[16]](#endnote-16)

**FIVE GUYS’ PROMOTION STRATEGY**

**General Overview**

Five Guys had a non-traditional promotional strategy. From the very beginning, the company had always eschewed traditional marketing campaigns such as television, radio, and print advertising. Instead, the company had relied on word of mouth,[[17]](#endnote-17) and more recently, had amplified its efforts with social media.[[18]](#endnote-18) The company also relied on publicity. Each element of Five Guys’ promotion strategy is examined below.

Word of Mouth

Five Guys had always relied heavily on word of mouth, and had more recently engaged in social-media promotions to develop and maintain customer relationships. The company’s reliance on these tools was best summarized by Fatima Diez, the company’s brand and communications manager: “We base our success on word of mouth, and always make sure that our crew understands that they are the greatest marketing system we can have. To boost word of mouth we rely on social media, which allows us to maintain and grow relationships . . .”[[19]](#endnote-19)

Murrell had always believed that the best marketers of Five Guys were its customers. If customers were satisfied with their experience, then they would market the business among their peers. Given this belief, Five Guys poured all of its resources into the product—the food—and spent very little on décor and advertising. The company had gone to great lengths to create a high-quality product that could generate significant positive word of mouth. For instance, Five Guys had always ensured that its potatoes were grown north of the 42nd parallel in an effort to maintain superior quality for its fries. Murrell had commented:

Most of our potatoes come from Idaho — about 8 percent of the Idaho baking potato crop. We try to get our potatoes grown north of the 42nd parallel, which is a pain in the neck. Potatoes are like oak trees — the slower they grow, the more solid they are. We like northern potatoes, because they grow in the daytime when it is warm, but then they stop at night when it cools down. It would be a lot easier and cheaper if we got a California or Florida potato.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Five Guys always used highly meticulous routines and cooking procedures to ensure a high-quality product was consistently delivered to customers. For example, when preparing fries, the kitchen staff first soaked the potatoes in water, then pre-fried them to eliminate steam, and then fried them a second time. Once cooked, French fries were shaken 15 times before being served to customers. Similarly, Five Guys had always relied on strict quality control for its hamburger. Beef had always been 80 per cent lean and fresh, never frozen. Buns were toasted on a grill (as opposed to a toaster) to create a caramelized flavour. Burger toppings were always meticulously arranged — onions and bacon were placed below the hamburger patties, while pickles and tomatoes were placed above the patty.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The company had also gone to great lengths to continue offering the same high-quality bun since it opened its doors in 1986.[[22]](#endnote-22) When Brenner’s, the bakery that produced the buns, closed, Five Guys hired two former bakers from Brenner’s to continue making the same bun.[[23]](#endnote-23) By November 2018, Five Guys had 10 bakeries operating throughout the United States. According to Murrell, “Our bread is baked daily, picked up by 3 p.m., and put on a truck or plane so every store gets fresh bread every morning, even if they are 400 miles [646 kilometres] away from the nearest bakery.”[[24]](#endnote-24) It should be noted that Five Guys had continued using most of the same vendors since the company opened in 1986. Murrell noted that,

. . . they’re not the cheapest by a long shot. We stick with what we like. One day, our purchasing guy said he wanted us to switch to a frozen burger product. But we all picked the fresh one in a blind test and stuck with that. We taste-tested 16 different types of mayonnaise to find the right one.[[25]](#endnote-25)

To further ensure that the company’s product was of high quality and would generate word of mouth, Five Guys had always conducted two third-party audits per week in every store. The first audit came in the form of a secret shopper or mystery shopper. A company representative pretended to be a regular customer, and instead rated the store’s crew on bathroom cleanliness, courtesy, and food preparation. The second audit was a safety audit. Inspectors identified themselves and examined the kitchen equipment. The crews who scored highest on these audits received additional pay — a crew of five or six employees might split an additional $1,000. Further, a company-wide press release was sent out to every store announcing the winners.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The company invested millions of dollars in this program. In 2018, the company expected to pay out approximately $20 million in worker bonuses.[[27]](#endnote-27) Five Guys believed that these audits — and the associated worker bonuses — kept crews motivated to consistently ensure a top customer experience, which in turn, helped generate significant word of mouth and repeat customers. Industry experts agreed: “Five Guys does zero advertising but by delivering consistently great customer experience, they’re able to build a word-of-mouth buzz that continues to bring new customers through the door,” noted Janet Eden-Harris of Market Force.[[28]](#endnote-28) As a result, Five Guys was one of the most talked about brands and had achieved a cult-like status.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The company stayed true to its core promotional principles, even when faced with challenging circumstances, such as opening restaurants in foreign markets. When Fatima Baez was asked what the best moment in her career was, she replied:

I think it was when Five Guys opened in Bercy Village (Paris) last summer [2016]. Prior to Five Guys, I had worked on a big fast-food brand that relies on more traditional marketing, so going into a new country where very few people knew what Five Guys was, without a budget for advertising and big stunts, was something completely new and a little scary. Everyone outside the company kept telling us we should do some campaign and a big opening party, but this brand keeps proving traditional views wrong: we had customers and vloggers waiting to try the product for hours before opening, showing once again the power of word of mouth. It amazes me every time.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Social Media

Five Guys amplified its reliance on word of mouth with activity on a variety of social media platforms. By November 2018, Five Guys had a well-established Facebook page with a large number of likes and numerous user posts. As of August 2018, Five Guys had a very strong presence on Facebook, with 1,187,978 likes and 1,114,518 followers.[[31]](#endnote-31) The company utilized its Facebook page to interact with customers, including answering their questions. Facebook was also important in marketing the company’s expansion efforts. For instance, when Five Guys expanded to the United Kingdom, the majority of the company’s promotional materials were released on Facebook, and frequent updates to the construction of the London location were posted.[[32]](#endnote-32)

By November 2018, Five Guys was also well established on Twitter with the user name @FiveGuys. The company joined Twitter in 2008 and tweeted almost every single day, with the majority of its tweets being responses to user comments and questions. As of August 2018, Five Guys had approximately 36,000 tweets, 78,200 followers, and 5,166 likes. Overall, Twitter had allowed Five Guys to effectively contact its customers and highlight its key messages to customers.[[33]](#endnote-33) Connecting with customers through social media had always been an important goal for Five Guys, according to Kenneth Westling, an online marketing specialist for Five Guys:

By monitoring a variety of different hashtags it gives us the opportunity to react quickly to negative experiences, but also the opportunity to reach out to those individuals who are trying us out for the first time, or simply telling us they enjoy our food. These are things we love to hear, and love having the opportunity to engage with these consumers on a more personal level.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Five Guys not only utilized social media as a major part of its promotional campaigns but also created a cross-functional social-media team, empowered local franchises and frontline employees, and effectively monitored its social-media operations with specialized social-media monitoring software. Five Guys ensured that users’ posts were filtered according to predetermined keywords, which allowed Five Guys staff to quickly identify key user responses and ensure that they received a prompt response. The keyword filters also allowed the company to determine consumers’ feelings toward the brand.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Critically, the company empowered franchisees to maintain a social media presence. For instance, while the company’s main Twitter handle, @Five\_Guys, was utilized to interact with customers, answer their questions, and provide information about general promotions and new store openings, each individual location had its own Twitter handle to make local communication more useful and more relevant. Individual locations were encouraged to communicate locally about the brand, specific products, and community events. Further, local franchisees replied to customer concerns themselves and made their own changes in an effort to improve the Five Guys experience for local consumers. Clearly, individual franchisees were in a much better position than the company’s corporate office to make these decisions.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The company also utilized geo-targeting to monitor specific conversation topics of interest, such as individual campaigns and initiatives. This strategy was critical in the company’s expansion efforts into the United Kingdom, according to Kenneth Westling:

When we opened the first Five Guys location in the UK, we used [Hootsuite] to monitor people’s discussions about us within a certain mile radius of the city of London. We were then able to reach out directly to them to let them know that we were coming. We utilized the geo-location search function to target our UK customer base.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The company also used Twitter to run some highly successful promotional contests. One such contest was the “Friday Fanatic” campaign, where users submitted a photo of themselves at a Five Guys location using the #fiveguysfanatic hashtag. In the successful #SayCheeseSweeps campaign, which generated more than 1,000 mentions on Twitter and Instagram, consumers took a picture of themselves with a Five Guys cheeseburger for a chance to win prizes. This promotion was so successful that the company then created a similar contest with its milkshakes, using the #ShareYourShake hashtag. Five Guys also featured its employees in the “Pursuit of Perfection” social media campaign. Consumers were given a behind-the-scenes look at the everyday life of the company’s frontline employees through the #HighFive hashtag. This campaign was highly successful and continued to be an ongoing initiative.[[38]](#endnote-38)

In addition to Facebook and Twitter, Five Guys was also active on Instagram, with the user name @fiveguys. As of August 2018, Five Guys had 1,775 posts and 162,000 followers. The Five Guys Instagram profile featured user-generated content, most of which showed the company’s customers interacting with the brand.[[39]](#endnote-39) Further, Five Guys maintained a presence on Pinterest with the user name Five Guys. By November 2018, Pinterest was a photo-sharing social media platform that was similar to Instagram. As of September 2018, Five Guys had 668 followers. The company’s Pinterest page featured a mix of user-generated and company-generated content.[[40]](#endnote-40)

By November 2018, the company was also active on Snapchat, under the user name Five-Guys. In November 2018, Snapchat was a photo-sharing app similar to Instagram and Pinterest, with the major difference being that the shared content lasted only between 1 and 10 seconds.[[41]](#endnote-41) Customers used Snapchat to share user-generated pictures and drawings about their experiences with the Five Guys brand. Further, Five Guys also had a presence on Google Plus under the name Five Guys Burgers and Fries. As of August 2018, the company had approximately 2,299 followers. The majority of the posts on this page were pictures posted by Five Guys, and many posts featured the company’s products.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Publicity

Five Guys relied on publicity as a promotional tool. The company had received significant publicity since its inception in 1986, and the majority of the publicity had been positive. Five Guys received numerous awards in the DC area, including a “Best Burger Award” from *The Washingtonian* magazine. In addition, the *Washington Post* referred to Five Guys as “The Willy Wonka of burgercraft.” Five Guys also received awards elsewhere, including in Dubai, New York, California, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, Missouri, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Florida.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The company had also received a number of industry-wide awards. In 2011, Zagat’s Fast Food Survey ranked Five Guys first in the categories of “Fast Food – Large Chains” and “Best Burger.”[[44]](#endnote-44) In 2012, in a Market Force Information poll of 7,600 fast-food consumers, Five Guys finished first in food quality/taste, service, cleanliness, and atmosphere.[[45]](#endnote-45) In March 2016, a Market Force poll found that Five Guys was the United Kingdom’s most popular fast-food chain. Further, a Harris poll in 2017 and 2018 named Five Guys the Burger Restaurant Brand of the Year. In 2018, a Market Force poll once again revealed that Five Guys was the United Kingdom’s most popular fast-food chain.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In addition to the positive publicity gained from media and industry awards, Five Guys also benefited from celebrity visits and implicit celebrity endorsements. In 2009, then US President Barack Obama went to a Five Guys in Washington, DC, along with his staff. The then president ordered a cheeseburger with lettuce, tomato, jalapeno peppers, and mustard.[[47]](#endnote-47) After Obama’s visit, Five Guys experienced a nationwide boost in sales. Despite the positive impact of Obama’s visit, Five Guys did little to market his visit. The company opted not to mention Obama’s visit on social media and opted not to issue a press release about the outing.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Molly Catalano, a company spokeswoman, explained the decision: “We figured there was so much buzz anyway. We wanted the president, or any celebrity or official, to feel they can come in and we’re not going to exploit it.” She added that the decision was consistent with the company’s public relations approach and overall promotional strategy: “Our PR [public relations] is similar to how we market. We’re not very proactive. We don’t really pitch stories and we don’t really send out press releases either.” In fact, the company had typically declined interview and media requests, and had not hired an external public relations agency.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Obama was not the only celebrity figure to endorse Five Guys. The company also received an endorsement from golfer Phil Mickelson, who purchased franchise rights for Orange County, California. Mickelson praised the company’s product and commented that “I grew up on In-N-Out. I thought that was the best burger until I had Five Guys. That is hands down the best burger I’ve ever had.” Five Guys also received an implicit vote of confidence from former NBA (National Basketball Association) star Shaquille O’Neal when he purchased 155 restaurants. While O’Neal had not publicly commented about Five Guys or its products, the fact that his name and money were associated with the brand likely helped yield positive effects for the company.[[50]](#endnote-50)

While Five Guys received significant positive publicity, not all of its publicity had been good. The influential magazine *Men’s Health* claimed that Five Guys’ burgers were unhealthy, with high calorie counts and high levels of saturated fat.[[51]](#endnote-51) Further, the Center for Science in the Public Interest listed the Five Guys bacon cheeseburger in its list of most unhealthy meals from a chain restaurant.[[52]](#endnote-52) *Time* magazine placed the company’s French fries in its list of “Top 10 Worst Fast-Food Meals.”[[53]](#endnote-53)

**AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON PROMOTION**

While many companies, including Nike, McDonald’s, Apple, and Coca-Cola, developed highly successful global brands through the use of traditional promotional vehicles such as advertising, a growing number of companies established successful brands without the aid of advertising and other traditionally used promotional media. Much like Five Guys, these companies relied on word of mouth, public relations, and viral marketing in lieu of traditional advertising.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Examples of companies that followed this path included Costco, which had not used advertising but had utilized direct mail and social media.[[55]](#endnote-55) Another company that eschewed advertising was Chipotle, which relied on social media and word of mouth to generate sales.[[56]](#endnote-56) Further, Spanx (the women’s undergarments company) began as a small company that could not afford advertising, and thus had to rely on word of mouth. While the company could advertise, founder Sarah Blakely commented that “the power of women discovering the brand from other women was actually a better strategy.” Similarly, Lululemon eschewed traditional advertising in favour of social media, word-of-mouth campaigns and in-store community boards. Other companies that followed this route included Jiffy’s Muffin Mix, which did not advertise but instead relied on word of mouth and Zara, one of the world’s largest retailers, which never had an advertising budget, but instead used money earmarked for advertising on expensive storefronts next to luxury retailers.[[57]](#endnote-57)

**what should BE DONE next**

The Five Guys promotion strategy centred on word of mouth, publicity,[[58]](#endnote-58) and social media.[[59]](#endnote-59) The company had always eschewed traditional promotional platforms such as TV, radio, print, and billboard advertising.[[60]](#endnote-60) The company had also not utilized coupons.[[61]](#endnote-61) While Five Guys’ lean promotion strategy was likely necessary in the company’s early days, Five Guys’ success in the past 10 to 15 years likely provided the company with a much larger promotional budget than before.[[62]](#endnote-62) As a result, Five Guys had an opportunity to rethink and adjust its promotion strategy going forward.

Murrell, the company’s founder and CEO had the opportunity to re-adjust the company’s promotional strategy for the future. In particular, where should he allocate the company’s promotional budget? Into which promotional media should he allocate the company’s promotion funds?

ENDNOTES

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17. Weise, op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
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