

# The Blimpie Revolution

**Mark Mears,**  
chief marketing officer  
of Blimpie, says it  
takes a revolution  
to create a customer.

## What's your vision for the Blimpie brand?

The vision is to create a cult-like status for our brand. We're trying to create the Blimpie experience to a point where it's not a sandwich you're having; it's a Blimpie. Just like when you go to Starbucks it's not a coffee; you have a Starbucks. So, we are re-positioning our brand as its own category — a Blimpie — because none of our competitors can sell a Blimpie.

## What is it about the Blimpie that gives it the opportunity to have that kind of a cult following?

It's the fresh-baked breads. It's the very unique and romantic builds and sauces that we use. It creates a taste that's different from Subway and others. We have a Panini grill, while our direct competition has a toaster. We use onion poppy ciabatta bread. We're rolling out garlic-herb focaccia bread this spring. We want to differentiate a Blimpie from a traditional neighborhood sub shop, and turn it into more of a consumer-driven, contemporary deli.

## Does the reinvention recall Blimpie's heritage or does it mark more of a departure?

We're not abandoning our heritage by any means; we're building upon it with more of a "fast casual" appeal. As a matter of fact, we are working on a new menu right now featuring a classics lineup. It includes the traditional Blimpie subs, both on the cold and hot platforms. Then we'll have chef-inspired builds, as well.

It's the best of both worlds — the old world neighborhood sub shop that you've known and loved but now with a little more energy and a little more vibe. It's a place where you still get authentic deli-style meats and cheeses but a bit more hip, fun, and energetic.

## What is your biggest challenge?

Not having the advertising budgets to win the battle of perception that some of our larger competitors have places a premium on finding unique and creative ways to tell our story.

## How do you compensate for that relative lack of advertising dollars?

I'll give you one example. November 3rd is National Sandwich Day. Because we sell a Blimpie — not a sandwich — we got the idea to take over National Sandwich Day and re-name it National Blimpie Day. We had a celebration in all of our stores across the country and gave guests a free Blimpie when they bought one at regular price.

We took it a step further and convinced the town of Sandwich, New Hampshire to re-name itself Blimpie, New Hampshire for that day. We fed the whole town of 1,200 people Blimpies and donated money to the school's kids' activity center. It was just a way to be creative and tell our story in a way that a 30-second TV spot or a national ad couldn't do — or we couldn't afford to do.

## Clearly you're headed more in the direction of word-of-mouth marketing.

Yes. About 17 percent of our customers account for 60 percent of our sales. So, we have a very core group of loyal followers and what I want them to do is tell their friends, their families, co-workers, and neighbors about Blimpie. With TiVo, gaming, computers, cable — you have so many choices that it's really tough to reach your customer with your message in the traditional ways.

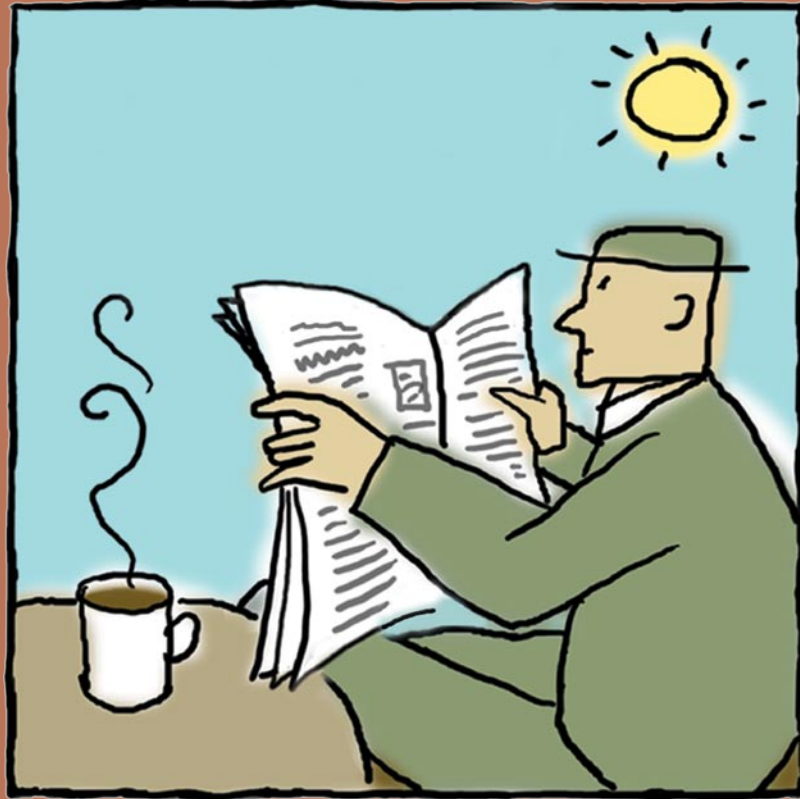
## How do you bring order to that kind of chaos?

I actually have a personal philosophy that transcends Blimpie that I call "revolutionary marketing." On one level, it's "revolutionary" in the literal sense of a dramatic uprising — of really being different and making a stand. On another level, it's revolutionary in the sense that everything we do revolves around the core essence of the brand; each touchpoint is like a circular motion in terms of a guest experience. There's a beginning, a middle and an end — and hopefully a repeat.

The magic is in how we activate the brand essence, the triggers that enable us to influence consumers — to buy more product, to buy ours versus somebody else's, come back more often, or tell a friend, for example. I'm always trying to use continuous improvement and metrics for performance to get better and better every time. So, it all comes back to the "revolutionary" process. ■

**Mark Mears** is chief marketing officer of **Blimpie International**, a 1,700-unit chain of quick-serve sandwich shops in the U.S., Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. Previously, Mark served in a variety of integrated marketing communication capacities within brand marketing (Pizza Hut/PepsiCo, JCPenney); advertising agency (Bozell, Jacobs, Kenyon & Eckhardt, Leo Burnett); promotion agency (DDB, Promotional Partners Worldwide, TIC TOC—"The Imagination Company!"); and database/direct agency (EURORSCG) segments.





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