

**Return to Real: A Research-Driven Strategy to Restore Consumer Confidence in
Chick-fil-A**

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PR 522: Storytelling With Data Intelligence

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December 11, 2025

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Proposed Solution

To rebuild trust with younger consumers and reestablish confidence in Chick-fil-A's quality, we propose a brand initiative centered on radical transparency, flavor reassurance, and direct consumer engagement. The Return to Real campaign reframes the chicken-sourcing change not as a loss, but as an opportunity: an invitation to show customers exactly how Chick-fil-A protects quality while adapting to new sourcing standards.

This solution positions Chick-fil-A as a brand willing to confront concerns head-on, give consumers behind-the-scenes access, and reaffirm what they love most: consistency, honesty, and taste.

Goals and Objectives

Campaign Goal: To restore consumer trust and reinforce Chick-fil-A's reputation for quality and transparency among younger demographics (18–34), following concerns related to the chicken sourcing change and lingering brand reputation issues.

SMART Objectives:

1. **Informational Objective.** Increase understanding of why Chick-fil-A updated its chicken sourcing standards by 30% among consumers aged 18–34 within 3 months of campaign launch, as measured by pre/post awareness surveys.
2. **Motivational Objective.** Improve positive brand perception (“trust that Chick-fil-A maintains high quality standards”) by 20% among Gen Z and Millennials within 4 months, based on brand sentiment tracking.

3. **Behavioral Objective.** Increase redemption of chicken-related app offers (taste-test coupons, sandwich BOGOs, etc.) by 15% within 6 months, indicating restored confidence and willingness to repurchase.

Target Audience

1. 18-34 year olds, or Gen Z to Millennial consumers: This range covers relatively young, tech/social-savvy consumers that stay up to date on fast food brand practices.
2. Chicken enthusiasts: This demographic points to consumers that have a preference for chicken when dining out.
3. Chick-Fil-A loyalists: This demographic is mostly college aged men and women who prefer Chick-Fil-A over other brands for a variety of reasons, including high-quality service and quality of food.

Research Methodology

Primary research was conducted through surveys and a focus group for quantitative and qualitative methodologies respectively. With the survey, we wanted to gauge consumer understanding of food making processes, as well as identify preferred characteristics of fast food chains. This included but was not limited to service quality, taste, etc, with the addition of the company's political stance, as Chick-Fil-A is uniquely known for holding controversial social stances.

The focus group was designed to gauge general understanding of the use of antibiotics in fast food, particularly on abbreviations like NAE or NAIHM. However, the main topic of discussion was what mattered most to customers when it came to decision-making. Ideally, the main discussion would give us insights on customer behavior and a gauge on how much brand practices affect purchasing decisions.

Secondary Research and Hypothesis Development:

For our secondary research, we looked at the general conversation around Chick-Fil-A announcing the switch from no antibiotics ever (NAE) to no antibiotics important to human medicine (NAIHM). The announcement became a hot topic shortly after the announcement with people not really understanding it. This wasn't just an assumed reaction; various major publications as well as smaller ones all were coming to the same conclusion, customers were now suspicious of what was going on. Some quotes included "I would probably be more hesitant to eat at Chick-fil-A" (Kapadia, 2024). The change was compared to the at Coca-Cola where "massive consumer backlash forced the company to bring back Classic Coke" (Kline, 2024).

Many outlets were dramatizing the fact that a place that only serves chicken, is making a major change to their chicken (Kiline, 2024). Overall, the research we were finding on the situation led to the conclusion that this change hurt Chick-Fil-A customers' trust and image of the company, something that would need to be addressed, leading us to our general hypothesis.

We presumed that if Chick-Fil-A were to come clean and really describe the chicken change in an honest genuine way, then the company could regain consumer trust. We also tested Chick-Fil-A against other chicken companies in the survey. Also we hypothesized that if we were to make it clear in the focus group, the general feedback would be positive.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Strong brand recognition and loyal customer base

- Chick-fil-A consistently ranks among the top QSR brands in customer loyalty and satisfaction.
- High repeat visitation rates and strong emotional attachment, especially in the Southeast.
- Reputation for exceptional customer service
 - Known industry-wide for hospitality, friendliness, speed, and accuracy.
 - Service quality is a strategic differentiator that competitors struggle to replicate at scale.
- Consistent quality and operational efficiency
 - Standardized training and strict operational procedures lead to reliable taste and service.
 - Stores consistently outperform competitors in average revenue per location and drive-thru efficiency.

Weaknesses

- Menu dependence on chicken limits variety
 - Reliance on a single protein narrows meal options compared to diversified competitors (e.g., McDonald's, Wendy's).

Makes the brand vulnerable if consumer preferences shift toward plant-based or non-chicken alternatives.
- History of socially controversial stances
 - Legacy reputation tied to past political donations continues to affect perception among younger, socially conscious consumers.
 - Creates ongoing brand risk during periods of cultural tension.

- Higher price point than some competitors
 - Premium pricing may reduce appeal for budget-conscious customers, especially during economic downturns.
 - Competitors' value menus create competitive pressure.
- High standards in training and operations can constrain expansion
 - Maintaining Chick-fil-A's signature service culture requires intensive operator selection and staff training.
 - Rapid growth can strain consistency, as scaling the "high-touch" model becomes more challenging.

Opportunities

- Growing consumer preference for chicken over beef
 - Chicken is seen as a healthier, lighter alternative, with consumption rising across demographics.
 - Provides room for menu extensions (e.g., grilled options, snacks, limited-time innovations)
- Acceleration of digital ordering and mobile loyalty programs
 - Continued growth in mobile app usage, delivery partnerships, and curbside pickup.
 - Enhances convenience and customer data collection for personalized marketing.
- International expansion potential
 - Chick-fil-A remains largely U.S.-centric with minimal global footprint.
 - Significant untapped opportunity in markets where American QSR brands perform well (Canada, UK, Asia).

- Increased focus on convenience and drive-thru optimization
 - More consumers prioritize speed, accessibility, and contactless service.
 - Chick-fil-A's strength in drive-thru efficiency positions it well for innovation in multi-lane design, mobile pickup, and micro-format locations.

Threats

- Growing competition from chicken-focused brands
 - Popeyes, KFC, Raising Cane's, and local chicken chains are aggressively expanding and launching new chicken sandwiches.
 - Competitors increasingly replicate Chick-fil-A's strengths (flavor profile, speed, value).
- Potential for consumer boycotts or social movements
 - Any renewed controversy can trigger viral backlash, especially on social media, pushing younger consumers toward competitors.
 - Cultural polarization increases reputational volatility.
- Rising cost of labor and ingredients
 - Industry-wide inflation in poultry, wages, and operational expenses impacts margins.
Higher prices may further discourage budget-focused customers.
- Economic uncertainty affecting discretionary spending
 - During downturns, customers may shift to lower-cost fast-food options or cook at home more often.

Survey Results

Q2 — Familiarity with “NAIHM”

- 0 respondents answered “Yes.”
- 10 respondents answered “No.”

Q3 — Familiarity with “NAE”

- 0 respondents answered “Yes.”
- 10 respondents answered “No.”

Q4 — “I think about health and safety practices when buying/eating food.” (0–10 scale)

- Average score: 5.8

Q5 — “All-natural/organic food tastes better than processed food.” (0–10 scale)

- Average score: 5.125

Q6 — “I would not buy processed food / food with antibiotics or chemicals.” (0–10 scale)

- Average score: 3.0

Q7 — Fast Food Average Rankings: “For this section, please rank this list of popular fast food destinations based on personal preference”

1. Chick-fil-A: 3.1
2. In-N-Out: 3.6
3. Taco Bell: 4.3
4. Raising Cane’s: 4.5
5. Chipotle: 5.0
6. McDonald’s: 5.4
7. Wendy’s: 5.4
8. Burger King: 7.5
9. KFC: 7.8
10. Popeyes: 8.4

Q8 — Factors Influencing Rankings (Open Response Themes)

- Taste / flavor: 10 mentions
- Food quality (freshness, ingredients): 10 mentions
- Convenience: 6 mentions
- Affordability / price: 5 mentions
- Frequency of eating there / familiarity: 4 mentions
- Avoidance of certain chains (“would never eat there”): 3 mentions
- Specific menu items influencing choice: 3 mentions

Q9 — “Please rate how important each part of a fast food establishment is to you as a consumer.” Participants rated each factor 1–5

(1 = Not Important at all, 5 = Very Important)

- **Q9_1 — Customer Service**
 - Average: 3.5
- **Q9_2 — Quality of Food (Taste)**
 - Average: 4.6
- **Q9_3 — Order Completion Speed**
 - Average: 3.2
- **Q9_4 — Public Perception**
 - Average: 2.4
- **Q9_5 — Price**
 - Average: 4.2
- **Q9_6 — Mobile Rewards App**
 - Average: 2.1

- Q9_7 — Personal Perception / Trust of Company
 - Average: 3.3
- Q9_8 — Political Stance of Company
 - Average: 2.2

Q10 — Age

Exact count of respondents by age:

- 21 years old: 4 respondents
- 22 years old: 2 respondents
- 33 years old: 1 respondent
- 28 years old: 1 respondent
- 45 years old: 1 respondent
- 23 years old: 1 respondent

Q11 — Gender

- Male: 6
- Female: 4

Q12 — Highest Education Completed

- Bachelor's Degree: 6
- Associate's Degree: 2
- High School / GED: 1
- Some College: 1

Q13 — Living Area

- Suburban: 5
- Urban: 4

- (No response): 1

Q14 — Household Size

- Household size 4: 4 respondents
- Household size 3: 3 respondents
- Household size 2: 1 respondent
- Household size 1: 1 respondent
- Household size 9: 1 respondent

Survey Insights

The survey results reveal that while respondents showed limited knowledge of technical sourcing terminology (with 0% recognizing acronyms like NAE or NAIHM), they place significant value on the broader attributes that shape their fast-food choices—namely taste, quality, convenience, and trust. Ratings for personal food attitudes show moderate concern for health and safety practices (average 5.8/10) and a neutral-to-positive preference for natural foods (average 5.1/10), but low avoidance of processed foods (3.0/10), suggesting that respondents are not heavily scrutinizing sourcing on their own. Instead, consumers implicitly rely on brands to maintain high standards on their behalf. Fast-food rankings reinforce these priorities: Chick-fil-A, In-N-Out, and Raising Cane's were rated most favorably, demonstrating that perceived consistency, flavor reliability, and quality reputation strongly influence consumer preference.

Q9 ratings further clarify what respondents find important in a fast-food brand. Quality of food (4.6/5), price (4.2), and customer service (3.5) were the highest priorities, while public perception, political stance, and mobile rewards apps ranked significantly lower. This

distribution shows that young consumers are functionally minded: they value what they personally experience over what others say or what the brand publicly aligns with. Additionally, trust in the company—rated 3.3/5—emerges as a meaningful emotional factor. Although not the highest explicit priority, trust functions as a “silent requirement” that underpins how respondents judge quality and consistency. When combined with open-ended responses emphasizing taste, quality, convenience, and familiarity, it becomes clear that brand trust is maintained through predictable experiences and transparent communication—not detailed knowledge of sourcing policies.

Taken together, these insights directly support the proposed Return to Real campaign. While the sourcing shift itself did not trigger major dissatisfaction, the data shows that Chick-fil-A must proactively reinforce what consumers value most: consistency, honesty, and quality. Respondents’ lack of clarity around the sourcing change, paired with their reliance on the brand to safeguard quality, highlights a crucial need for stronger transparency and clearer reassurance. The campaign’s multi-phase strategy—radical transparency videos, taste reassurance sampling, micro-influencer truth-testing, and community-based storytelling—aligns seamlessly with these findings. By exposing behind-the-scenes sourcing practices, reaffirming taste consistency, and rebuilding trust through authentic engagement, Chick-fil-A positions itself as a leader willing to communicate openly and maintain the standards consumers depend on. This approach not only protects loyalty in the wake of the sourcing change but also strengthens Chick-fil-A’s competitive standing in an increasingly crowded chicken market.

Focus Group Results

Our focus group consisted of college students ages 21-23. We focused on basing our questions around what they know about how companies like Chick-fil-A source their chicken and their thoughts on the company as a whole. Through this focus group, we learned that college-aged students do not know much about sourcing or the terms no antibiotics ever and no antibiotics important to human medicine. Most of these students cared more about price instead of focusing on the health benefits of eating chicken that has some type of antibiotics. Some of the participants couldn't tell that the chicken was different, they had no idea about the change, and if they did hear about it on social media it did not change their opinion on the company. This age group at this time in their life are extremely focused on the price of fast food places but in the future they will be more aware of what they are putting in their bodies when it comes to ingredients that fast food companies use. Throughout our conversation all of the students still enjoy Chick-fil-A and only brought up that it is the one place that they will go to for high quality and fast chicken.

Focus Group Key Quotes

1. What do you know, if anything, about how antibiotics are used in raising chickens?

“Like I think I’m like vaguely aware that my food is coming from like factory farming or like very industrialized agriculture, but it’s not necessarily something that I think about.”

2. Chick-fil-A recently shifted to a new chicken sourcing standard. What, if anything, have you noticed about the chicken recently?

“I feel like I might've seen like a couple of comments online about it, about how they've changed like suppliers. But I also am not convinced that if people did like a blind taste test, they would actually be able to reliably identify any difference and attribute it to a new chicken source.”

3. Suppose you and your friends wanted to go out to a fast food restaurant, what spots would you recommend?

“I really like Chick-fil-A or Panda Express, which again, are probably not the best with high-quality chicken.”

4. What matters most to you—taste, values, quality, convenience, brand identity, etc.?

“I definitely feel like I value, at least where I am right now, like kind of the convenience and the value factor. Like all those ethical things are great, but I'm just not really in a position to be like supporting those monetarily.”

Focus Group Insights

This focus group showed us that Chick-fil-A is in a good position when it comes to their concern about their change of chicken source. Many of the students that participated in the focus group could not tell that there was a difference to the chicken and if they did see something about the change on social media it did not affect their feelings about Chick-fil-A. With this information it gives Chick-fil-A the opportunity to be a company that did something like this smoothly that does not affect the brand. This also shows that they are missing out of the opportunity to inform

their customers and others about their chicken change. In their app and FAQ's they can be more informative and educate their customers about this change and possible changes in the future to ensure that they keep the trust with their loyal customers. Overall college aged customers are not concerned or knew about this change but with this information Chick-fil-A makes some changes to inform their customers when it comes to the ingredients that they use.

Solution/Action

Our campaign translates insights from our research into a multi-phase strategy designed to rebuild taste confidence, strengthen transparency, and differentiate Chick-fil-A in an increasingly competitive chicken market.

Phase 1: Radical Transparency Activation

- Launch a short-form video series (“Real Chicken. Real Standards.”) showing Chick-fil-A chefs, supplier partners, and nutrition staff explaining the sourcing shift in simple, approachable language.
- Use TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and in-app pop-ups to meet younger audiences where they already consume brand content.
- Host a “Taste the Truth” microsite featuring FAQs, sourcing information, behind-the-scenes footage, and myth-busting.

Purpose: Achieves the informational objective by clarifying the sourcing policy and eliminating confusion that the chicken was downgraded.

Phase 2: Taste Reassurance & Sampling Push

- Introduce limited-time in-app offers for a free or discounted classic Chick-fil-A sandwich (“Trust Your Taste Test”).
- Stores host “Taste Back” sampling hours, where customers can try fresh chicken bites and compare flavor profiles with staff.
- Launch user-generated TikTok prompt: “Does Chick-fil-A still hit? Taste test it.” Encourage honest reactions.

Purpose: Supports the behavioral objective by incentivizing trial and reinforcing the idea that quality hasn't changed.

Phase 3: Rebuilding Brand Relationship With Gen Z & Millennials

- Partner with culturally relevant creators and micro-influencers known for food reviews, authenticity, and transparency, avoiding overly “polished” or corporate-feeling influencers.
- Share “Real People. Real Chicken.” testimonial content curated from both influencers and real customers.
- Roll out new in-store messaging emphasizing consistency: signage, tray liners, and QR codes linking to sourcing info.

Purpose: Supports the motivational objective by increasing trust, favorability, and relatability.

Phase 4: Reputation Refresh Through Community Engagement

- Highlight Chick-fil-A's community-based initiatives (scholarships, hunger relief programs) through refreshed storytelling.
- Position transparency as the new brand pillar: "Quality You Can See."

Purpose: Addresses lingering reputation issues by giving younger consumers more holistic reasons to feel good about supporting the brand.

Call to Action

- Chick-Fil-A needs to construct a campaign to rebuild any trust lost from the chicken change in those who noticed it.
- Even though the chicken didn't have as massive implications on our participants as originally perceived through secondary research, a campaign to strengthen loyalty and build trust is crucial for Chick-Fil-A's success as other major competitors are becoming stronger.
- The most important key qualities of this campaign must focus on consistency, honesty, and the quality of the brand. These three factors were found most important to consumers, so a campaign that focuses on them can elevate the brand over others.
- Improve transparency on chicken change in general, current webpage doesn't tell customers anything about what the change means, it just tells them what happened

(Chick-fil-A, 2025). The learn more page is self serving and unhelpful, this should be changed to reflect the honesty of the brand.

- Our team has gained unique insights and understanding into the situation with consumers and can help develop a strong plan to benefit Chick-Fil-A in the long run. We are the team to hire because not only have we researched the target audience extensively, but we are a part of it.

Appendix

Appendix A. Full Survey Results

Q1 — “Statement of Informed Consent”

10 agreements

Q2 — Familiarity with “NAIHM”

Yes: 0

No: 10

Q3 — Familiarity with “NAE”

Yes: 0

No: 10

Q4 — “I think about health and safety practices when buying/eating food.” (0–10 scale)

Average score: 5.8

10: 1 respondent

7: 3 respondents

6: 1 respondent

5: 3 respondents

4: 1 respondent

2: 1 respondent

Q5 — “All-natural/organic food tastes better than processed food.” (0–10 scale)

Average score: 5.125

10: 1 respondent

7: 2 respondents

5: 3 respondents

4: 2 respondents

3: 1 respondent

0: 1 respondent

Q6 — “I would not buy processed food / food with antibiotics or chemicals.” (0–10 scale)

Average score: 3.0

10: 1 respondent

6: 1 respondent

3: 3 respondents

2: 2 respondents

1: 1 respondent

0: 2 respondents

Q7 — Fast Food Preference Rankings

(Lower = better)

Chick-fil-A: 3.1

In-N-Out: 3.6

Taco Bell: 4.3

Raising Cane’s: 4.5

Chipotle: 5.0

McDonald's: 5.4

Wendy's: 5.4

Burger King: 7.5

KFC: 7.8

Popeyes: 8.4

Q8 — Factors Influencing Rankings (Open-Ended Coding Results)

Taste / flavor: 10 mentions

Food quality (freshness, ingredients): 10 mentions

Convenience: 6 mentions

Affordability / price: 5 mentions

Familiarity / frequency of eating there: 4 mentions

Avoidance of certain chains (“would never eat there”): 3 mentions

Specific menu items influencing choice: 3 mentions

Q9 — Importance Ratings for Fast Food Attributes (1–5 scale)

(1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important)

Attribute | Average Rating

Customer Service: 3.5

Quality of Food (Taste): 4.6

Order Completion Speed: 3.2

Public Perception: 2.4

Price: 4.2

Mobile Rewards App: 2.1

Personal Perception/Trust of Company: 3.3

Political Stance of Company: 2.2

Q10 — Age Distribution

21 years old: 4 respondents

22 years old: 2 respondents

23 years old: 1 respondent

28 years old: 1 respondent

33 years old: 1 respondent

45 years old: 1 respondent

Q11 — Gender

Male: 6

Female: 4

Q12 — Highest Education Completed

Bachelor's Degree: 6

Associate's Degree: 2

High School / GED: 1

Some College (no degree): 1

Q13 — Living Area

Suburban: 5

Urban: 4

No response: 1

Q14 — Household Size

Household of 4: 4 respondents

Household of 3: 3 respondents

Household of 2: 1 respondent

Household of 1: 1 respondent

Household of 9: 1 respondent

Appendix B. Focus Group script/transcript

Chick-Fil-A Group Focus Group Discussion Guide

[Internal Note] Informational Research Goal:

This qualitative study aims to understand consumers' awareness and misconceptions surrounding "No Antibiotics Important to Human Medicine" (NAIHM) chicken, their perceptions of brand trust and sourcing practices, and the behavioral factors that influence loyalty and repeat purchases.

The findings will help inform communication strategies that strengthen consumer understanding and engagement with the brand.

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Welcome and thank participants for joining today's discussion and give the following overview:

Housekeeping:

- *This session will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy when analyzing responses. The recording will not be shared outside of our team and PR 522 class.*
o Does everyone consent to this?
- *Please silence your phones and try to speak one at a time so everyone's ideas can be heard.*

Ground Rules:

- *Remember, there are no right or wrong answers—please share your honest opinions and experiences.*
- *All responses will remain confidential and are equally valued.*
- *Feel free to eat or drink during the discussion.*

Purpose:

- *Today, we'll explore your awareness and perceptions of how food is sourced, especially regarding chicken antibiotic policies*
- *The results of this focus group will help us develop a strategic PR campaign for a hypothetical client in our PR 522 class*
- *This focus group discussion will last about 30–40 minutes.*

1. Introductory Question (5 min)

1. When you think about *where your food comes from*, what comes to mind?
o What matters most to you when choosing what meat or poultry to buy or eat?

Transition Questions (8-10 min)

Before we move into more detailed topics, we'd like to understand your general awareness of how chicken is raised and labeled.

2. What do you know, if anything, about how antibiotics are used in raising chickens?
 - o Have you heard of any terms or labels like “No Antibiotics Ever” (NAE) or “No Antibiotics Important to Human Medicine” (NAIHM)?
3. Thinking about your understanding of these terms, what differences—*if any*—do you think exist between NAE and NAIHM?
 - o Where have you seen or heard about these terms (for example, through social media, packaging, advertising, or word of mouth)?

Key Questions (15-20 min)

4. What factors influence your level of *trust* in a chicken brand’s quality or sourcing practices?
 - o Are there brands you trust more than others?
 - o What makes them trustworthy (e.g., transparency, packaging, reputation, values)?
 - o What makes a food brand trustworthy in general
5. Suppose you and your friends wanted to go out to a fast food restaurant, what would the spots you recommend be?
 - o Why did you gravitate towards those spots versus others?
 - o What makes the places you picked better than other spots in your mind?
6. Now let’s get even more specific, let’s say you and your friends want to go get fast food, and they really want to get chicken, what spot would you choose and why?
 - o Why did you recommend that spot over other competitors, such as (if they answered Chick-Fil-A, you still ask so they don’t know which company we represent, potentially ask why not Raising Cane’s? Vary alternative chicken spot. If they said another chicken spot that wasn’t Chick-fil-A, don’t use it every time, perhaps, but definitely ask why x over Chick-fil-A
 - o If you had to pick a second place not the one you answered first why would you pick that place.
8. Chick-fil-A recently shifted to a new chicken sourcing standard (e.g., NAHMI compliance), which some customers believe has changed the taste or quality.
 - o What, if anything, have you noticed about the chicken recently?

o How do these changes influence your trust in the brand?

o Did you even hear about the change?

9. How aware were you of Chick-fil-A's supplier change before now?

o What have you heard—if anything—on social media, TikTok, or from friends?

o How do online conversations influence your own opinions?

10. Thinking specifically about your own loyalty:

o What would make you more or less likely to continue eating at Chick-fil-A or any brand in general moving forward?

o **What matters most to you—taste, values, quality, convenience, brand identity, etc.?**

11. **Last Question:**

o If you could give chicken brands one piece of advice on how to earn and keep your trust—especially when it comes to how they raise or source their chicken—what would it be? This question feels in trouble now since nobody cares about the chicken sourcing but we still can ask it, not sure if you wanna rephrase it?

Thank you everyone for your time. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to us via email.

Immediate insights: Nobody knew about the chicken change

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