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EMERGING CHAIN BOLOCO IS KEEN ON GREEN

Burrito maven Boloco uses third-party feedback to both give the restaurant chain legitimacy and help it grow.

By Margaret Littman, Contributing Editor -- Chain Leader, 3/1/2009

Most restaurant chains, or, humans, for that matter, shy away from criticism. But at emerging chain Boloco (<http://www.boloco.com>), executives surf the Internet and receive Google Alerts e-mails, looking for the random blog post or other reference to a negative experience at one of their 15 restaurants. Then, either the president or the CEO responds directly to these diners to address their concerns.

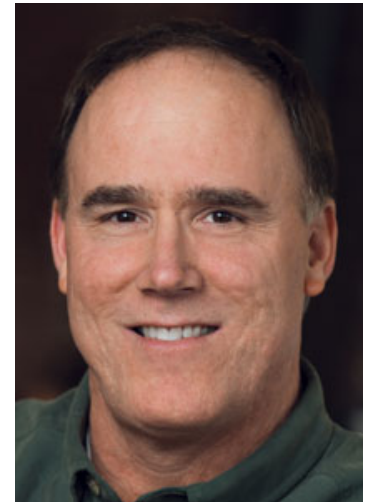
"We are constantly engaging feedback. In the early days that was the way we could hang our hat," says Michael Harder, Boloco's president and COO.

Boloco, which stands for "Boston Local Co.," is a 12-year-old burrito concept based in, obviously, Boston. The menu includes smoothies and not-necessarily-Mexican burritos that are designed to be eaten on the road. While it has grown up over the years, even changing its name from The Wrap and buying back franchise rights it once sold, the emphasis on bringing outsiders in and soliciting feedback has remained an integral part of its business plan.

"One of the basics of the concept is evolving and listening to customers," Harder says. "Our customer needs might be different three years down the road. But we will find ways to be ahead of the changes."

Not Reinventing the Wheel

This philosophy does more than help the chain woo a disgruntled customer who is disappointed that a dish has been taken off the menu. The approach has also helped the chain reinforce its positioning as a progressive, sustainable company. For example, the team brought in a vegan customer to talk to the chain's managers about his beliefs.



President and COO Michael Harder is hands-on in answering customer concerns and complaints at Boloco, a process he says helps the growing chain learn what its diners want.



From the countertops to the light bulbs to the burrito bowls, it is hard to find an element of Boloco's interior that is not eco-friendly.

"It helps them understand that when you make a mistake it is a big deal," Harder says.

One of only two chains certified by Boston-based Green Restaurant Association (<http://www.dinegreen.com>), Boloco has used the third-party certification to build its reputation as a green pioneer. Among the changes it has implemented over the years are: the use of naturally raised meats, use of low- and no-VOC paints, tankless water heaters, low-flow sprayers, and recycled paper resin countertops, and recycling and composting waste.

Instead of figuring out how to implement these changes on its own, the fast-casual Boloco sought out the help of GRA, Harder says.

Give the Students What They Want

Boloco is taking growth in the economic downturn with a measured pace, opening four or five units this year. But the chain plans to have 50 units open by 2011, with expansion outside of New England. Boloco started near college campuses, and still has many college-centric locations, but it is also growing in suburban areas with young families.

The advantage of the college market, Harder says, is that students are willing to share their views. "College students tend to be very vocal. They send us feedback, they sit down with us in restaurants," he says. "Sometimes we don't even have to seek them out." Because today's college students are so eco-aware, the chain gets vocal support for all its green initiatives.

"We are small, we not going to change the world," Harder adds. "But we think what we are doing helps."

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