

Anthropology in the Work Place: The Corporate World of California Pizza Kitchen

This research focuses on the anthropology of branding, marketing, and consumerism within the corporate realm. In particular, I investigate how employees present their employers' corporate marketing strategy in a restaurant context. California Pizza Kitchen (CPK) is an ideal case study because the company strives to market not only food but also a California culture. The concept is that CPK provides guests with food and a place to eat, but the employee's job is to provide the guest with a California dining experience.

Background

California Pizza Kitchen is not the only corporation to consider marketing from an anthropological perspective. The new field of business anthropology (also referred to as corporate anthropology) is gaining significant popularity. As Caulkins (2012) states, "...anthropologists can collect information on client motivation and identity to increase understanding of client behavior." This same concept can be applied to employees, not just clients, to better understand how they identify with the product they're selling. This helps businesses sell more consistent and representative products, especially in the restaurant industry where consistency is a key component of success.

Anthropologists take a holistic approach to the study of people, so they also take a holistic approach to the research of people. Anthropologists in this field utilize both qualitative and quantitative research methods to approach business from a whole new perspective. Caulkins (2012) also discusses the important role anthropologists play in the business world with regards to branding, as can be seen in this quote: "Anthropologists in marketing may work on branding and other efforts to match the product with the demographics of the market."

California Pizza Kitchen markets more than food; they market a California dining

experience. This California branding can be seen in many aspects of the company. For example, the mission statement for CPK is: “We are passionate individuals committed to inspiring others by bringing California creativity to every meal.” In the significant statement of the company’s mission they are emphasizing a California culture. This California culture can also be seen in the actual restaurant locations in regards to employee uniforms, store décor, and the menu.

The standards for employee uniforms accommodate a more relaxed/laid back ambiance, with a wide variety of shirt colors to choose from, jeans, and very limited restrictions on accessories. The décor in all CPK stores highlights iconic California culture with silhouetted pictures of surfers on the walls, yellow and orange paint accents to remind the guest of a sunset, green walls to subtly hint at CPK’s eco-friendly practices, and produce on display for the guests to see how fresh CPK is. The company logo is a palm tree, which illustrates CPK’s strong roots to California. In fact, California Roots just so happens to be the name of one of CPK’s signature cocktails that is shaken with fresh avocado. Many menu items have “California” in the name, such as the California Club Pizza, or the California Cobb Salad. In almost every aspect of the company, California is clear and present.

This research examines how California culture is understood, as well as portrayed, by California Pizza Kitchen front of house employees across the United States. In particular, I focus on hourly, front of house employees (servers, take out, bussers, and hosts) to determine how these employees perceive California. The end goal is to determine whether the corporate view of California culture is perceived the same by the front of house employees.

CPK has a specific view of California, which the corporation markets to the public. CPK also has nationwide training for all employees across the United States that is in place to emphasize the significance of embracing and presenting a California culture during every work

shift. How employees actually understand and perceive California, however, probably varies by individuals, and possibly, region.

The primary research questions are: a) Is the product (California culture) being consistently presented by front of house employees in every region across the country? In other words, do front of house employees accurately portray the CPK corporate view of California culture? b) If not, does distance from California influence the front of house employees' understanding of/relationship with California culture?

Methods

In order to yield as many survey responses as possible, and thus generate the most representative data, the Vice President of the West Coast agreed to send the survey out to the entire hourly, front of house staff through email. The corporate email emphasized that the survey was voluntary and anonymous, but that employee input is helpful and participation is highly encouraged. California Pizza Kitchen divides the United States into three distinct regions: West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast. The surveys were distributed by region in order to collect data for a cross country comparison. While the regions are approximately equal in geographical size, the store and employees quantities are not equally distributed. Participants were asked eight questions with designated answer options, no room for further elaboration. Survey questions focused on identifying a link, if any, between hourly employees' connection to California and the ability of said employee to "sell" a California culture to guests.

Although a series of interviews with corporate employees has been completed, the primary data collected in this project are the survey responses. The questionnaire for the corporate office interview is relatively short, with questions designed to provoke elaborate answers. Gummesson (2001) recommends "...alternative directions with qualitative rather than quantitative inquiry in

focus." He states that the only way to truly understand how people brand things is to ask them. A holistic approach to understanding business practices is permitted by employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather and interpret data.

Results

Of the approximately 9,000 hourly, front of house employees in CPK's U.S. locations, I received 5,228 responses (58%). The International stores were excluded from the study. The results from the survey support the research question by showing a consistent trend in variance from the West Coast region to the East Coast region. This is visible in most of the survey questions. A subset of the survey questions are discussed below.

A) "How do you perceive California?" The options for this question are: positive, neutral, or negative. Seventy two percent of employee responded "Yes" in the West Coast region, but this number decreases approximately ten percent with each region moving east (Table 1). This steady drop is not the same with negative responses, but the results from this question highlight the spectrum that holds the West Coast and East Coast on opposite ends. If the perception of California varies to this great of a degree amongst employees, then the portrayal of California may also follow this trend of variance.

B) Employee perceptions of food and décor

As demonstrated in Tables 2 and 3, employees in all three regions had much stronger "Yes" responses than "No" responses. The disparity between the West Coast region and the East Coast region is not as exaggerated in the results for these questions, but a stronger association with California in the West Coast region than in the East Coast region in present. These results indicate that although employees strongly believe the food and decor of their store locations represent California, the same enthusiasm was not visible when employees (?) were asked to

identify oneself with California.

D) “As a CPK employee, do you think you represent California?”

The West Coast region exemplifies one extreme end of the spectrum with the East Coast on the other, and the Midwest region somewhere in between (Table 4).

E) “Which are you selling more, the food or the dining experience?”

The available response options are: food, dining experience, or both equally. California Pizza Kitchen set up the training program to emphasize the dining experience, not just the food, but the ideal answer according to CPK would be the third option, both equally. The results for the West Coast employees show a focus on the dining experience, with a good balance between food and experience. The Midwest region yields similar results, but there is a big shift with the East Coast region. While there is still an effort to sell a dining experience, the main focus is food in the East Coast region. The West Coast region is the closest to CPK’s ideal response, while the East Coast region is the furthest from it, as shown in Table 5. This further supports the hypothesis by showing the variance amongst employees across the country.

Conclusion

There is a consistent trend in the data acquired from the front of house employee survey. The farther a CPK employee is from California, the less likely he/she is to present California culture as the company has defined it. This specific case study of California Pizza Kitchen could be used to implement the practices for marketing a culture with a product on a much broader scale. Culture makes things, especially food, more familiar, more desirable, more distinct and therefore more marketable. This success can only be found if the product and culture are presented accurately. Conducting research on employees’ perception of and presentation of a product through qualitative research methods would expand the field of business anthropology greatly.

Charts

Table 1: How do you perceive California?

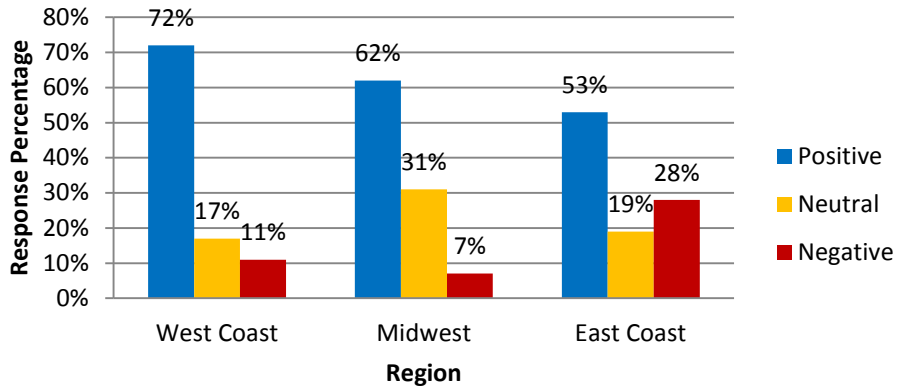


Table 2: Do you believe the decor in CPK accurately represents California?

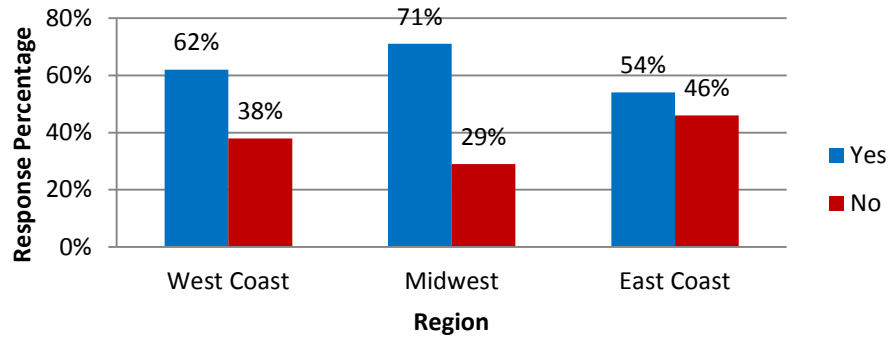


Table 3: Do you believe the food at CPK accurately represents California?

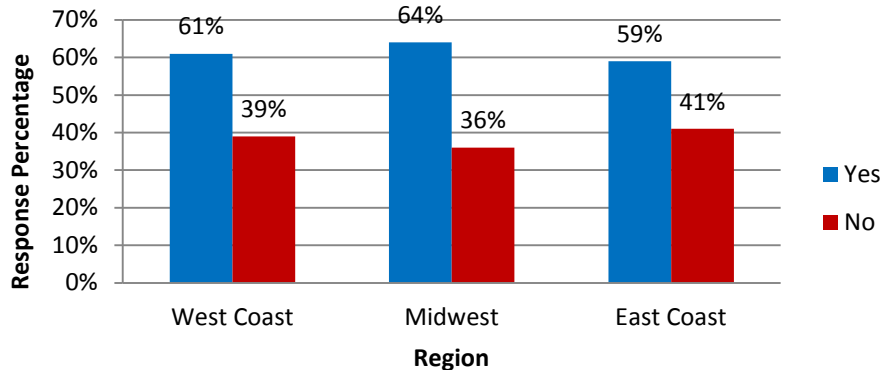


Table 4: As a CPK employee, do you think you represent California?

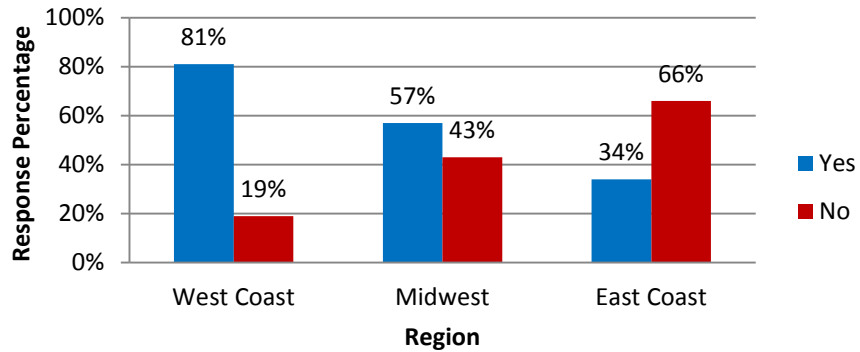


Table 5: Which are you selling more: the food or the dining experience?

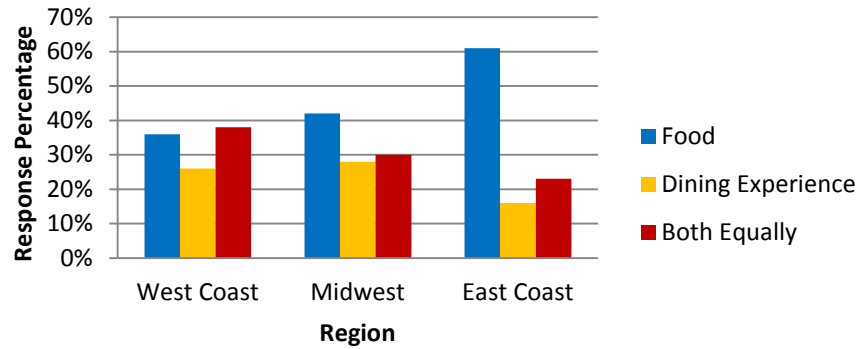


Table 6: Hourly FOH Survey Results

Region	Total Number of Front of House Employees	Total Number of Responses
West Coast	~4,400	2,860
Midwest	~1,400	756
East Coast	~3,100	1,612
All Regions	~9,000	5,228

California Pizza Kitchen Hourly Employee Survey

1. Which region are you from?

-West coast -Midwest -East coast

2. How do you perceive California?

-positive -negative -neutral

3. What is your relationship to California?

-born there -grew up there -visited there -never been there

4. Which of the following best describes California? Select all that apply.

-sunny -surfing -expensive -show business -laid back/casual -mountains
-pollution -jobless -wild west -creative -coastal -superficial

5. Do you believe the décor in CPK accurately represents California?

-yes -no

6. Do you believe the food at CPK accurately represents California?

-yes -no

7. As a CPK employee, do you think you represent California?

-yes -no

8. Which are you selling more: the food or the dining experience?

-food -dining experience -both equally

Works Cited

Caulkins, Douglas D., and Ann T. Jordan (editors)

2012 *A Companion to Organizational Anthropology*. Blackwell Publishing Limited.

Gummesson, Evert

2001 Are Current Research Approaches In Marketing Leading Us Astray? *Marketing Theory*. 1:27-48.