

Captain D's focuses on branding in 2012

Nation's Restaurant News speaks with CMO Jonathan Muhtar about the brand's strategy in the New Year

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When Jonathan Muhtar joined Captain D's Seafood Kitchen as its new chief marketing officer in late November, he began reformulating the brand's marketing plans in the wake of two big events: the selection of TM Advertising as its agency of record and [the acquisition of 65-unit Grandy's Country Cookin'](#).

Muhtar, who most recently was vice president of global marketing and innovation at Burger King, primarily is focused on refining the systems and processes for Captain D's marketing and menu development. The chain's positioning as a seafood specialist within the fast-casual segment not only attracted Muhtar to Captain D's, but also should allow for growth in 2012, he said.

With 2012 shaping up to be another uncertain year for consumers, Muhtar told Nation's Restaurant News that Captain D's needs to ensure the rollout of more surefire menu items and promotions.



What are your expectations for 2012?

I'd say we're hoping for the best and planning for the worst. There have been some encouraging signs in the past few months: Consumer confidence is on an uptick, and unemployment is down a bit. But some of the key concerns about the more general economy are still there. We continue to get shocks to the system, whether from Europe or the States, and to some extent that will continue. It's hard to predict their impact, so we have to be prepared for more uncertainty.

What led to TM winning the Captain D's account, and are you pursuing any marketing efficiencies with Grandy's?

What put TM ahead of the competition was their strong strategic foundation. Their pitch included their own consumer research, and their initial thoughts on our positioning lined up with what I thought as well. They were the best fit for us, particularly in an environment where we're not just looking to break

through with new messaging, but also to define fertile ground for our brand to stand upon and follow through for years to come.

For now, Grandy's is totally separate from Captain D's [in terms of marketing], but over time there will be opportunities for efficiencies.

You're coming from Burger King to a much smaller chain with a more narrowly focused menu. How does your experience inform what you want to do with Captain D's?

The two brands are very different in terms of product offering and brand positioning. However, my experiences with Burger King, Smoothie King and consulting have given me a foundation for what it takes to successfully market a restaurant. I came here and saw that we were lacking a few things, like really strong processes behind our strategic planning, positioning, consumer insights and new product development. There had been some successes in new product introductions and marketing promotions, but there had also been a lot of misses, largely due to a lack of strategic planning and the process by which you test and vet ideas to pull out the winners.

Captain D's "Four for \$4.99" meals are an aggressive value offering. Is the name of the game in 2012 value-driven traffic, or is the brand also considering some average-check-building items and promotions?

It's the balance between the two that causes us to have long-term success. We'll need a strong value proposition, but I've always believed that value doesn't come at just one price point. We need that attractive lower-priced offering as part of the annual marketing calendar, but we have a great opportunity to offer incredible values with more premium products.

Our brand strengths come out to be our cooked-to-order meals, perceptions as a sit-down place and expertise in seafood. With those brand attributes, offering an attractive price point makes it all the more appealing when we're already a trusted source.

What are your plans for social media in the near future?

As I look at our social initiatives now, we're doing the very basics. We have a presence on Facebook and have grown our "likes" by 300 percent over the past year. But it's still at a relatively low number for our industry. There's still a lot of upside for digital media. People are spending more time online through mobile and traditional computers, and we're under-tapped there in terms of our marketing spend. It's a key initiative for my team to unlock this potential and go about it in the right way.

Contact Mark Brandau at mark.brandau@penton.com.
Follow him on Twitter: [@Mark_from_NRN](https://twitter.com/Mark_from_NRN)

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