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What's holding Arby's back?

by [Denise Lee Yohn](#) * • 16 Nov 2009

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While the restaurant industry as a whole has struggled during the current macroeconomic conditions, Arby's seems to be having a tougher time than most quick-service chains. [Earlier this month](#), Wendy's/Arby's Restaurant Group Inc. reported that same-store sales were down 9 percent in Arby's North America stores, its worst since Q1. The company is implementing a number of initiatives to improve performance and boost sales, including testing a value menu. Denise Lee Yohn, brand as business expert, points out that the improvements may need to start with the company's own brand message.



Quick! When I say "Arby's," what's the first thing that comes to mind? I'm guessing for most people, the answer is "roast beef."

OK, so, what's the second thing? What else comes to mind? Anything? Sure, you might start listing off other products on the chain's menu, or you might recall a recent deal they've been promoting. But do you think of what the Arby's brand stands for? Does a single overarching idea for the brand come to mind?

Probably not. That's because I don't think Arby's has one. Unlike Subway — which has worked hard to equate its brand with "healthy" — and Quizno's — who's "toasted" angle has been promoted less consistently but is nonetheless a key brand driver — Arby's seems to lack a distinctive, compelling platform for its brand.

Perhaps such a strategy exists — but if so, it hasn't been communicated as clearly or executed as consistently as it needs to be in order to breakthrough and get enough traction to rally brand perceptions and offset sales declines.

Recent marketing communications haven't promoted the brand values and attributes in a cohesive way. The current "Worth Every Penny" campaign that pairs product beauty shots with a strong price message seems a sharp departure from recent ads. Product quality attributes like fresh and not-greasy were promoted in the past year by some spots that featured cheery restaurant crews and other ads that took on more "adult" themes.

Additionally, Arby's seems to lack a clear brand personality and distinctive competitive positioning. The tag "I'm Thinking Arby's" may represent an attempt to express the crave-ability of the chain's products, but it does little to put a face on the brand.

The chain's product strategy could also use a stronger brand tie. Their "barbell" approach — introducing premium sandwiches on one hand and rolling out a value menu

on the other — may be necessary in the current competitive environment. But without a communications campaign that unites all of the efforts behind a single idea, the brand seems to lack focus and consumers are left confused.

People need clear messaging and strong cues in order to file the brand into a mental file folder that their brains can conveniently access the next time they're deciding where to eat. Is Arby's a value player that offers large quantities at cheap prices? Or is it a higher-quality good food brand? Or perhaps an alternative to generic burger fare? Does Arby's know which?

Finally, I can't remember the last time Arby's visual identity and image were updated. The hat, the Western-inspired lettering, and the brown and red colors are widely recognized and certainly there's equity in them. But they don't seem relevant to anything the brand is doing now. Those elements should be updated and used to promote the brand platform.

To their credit, Arby's management *has* initiated smart, important changes recently. They're increasing their ad fund, they've hired a business consultant to help struggling franchisees and they've added new sweets, treats, and snacks to their menu to tap into current consumer eating trends. Now if they get their brand strategy right and execute it with consistency and clarity, they'll be firing on all cylinders.

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