Marketing Brand Strategy

# Cracker Barrel CEO Julie Masino is out. Was the logo really to blame?

By **Margo Waldrop,** Content Writer
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## The abandoned redesign became the defining image of a troubled tenure. Brand experts explain how one visual


When Cracker Barrel unveiled a simplified logo last August, retiring the familiar 'Old Timer' who had greeted travelers for decades, customers accused the company of abandoning its identity, conservative commentators amplified the backlash and, within days, Cracker Barrel restored the previous design and suspended a planned restaurant makeover.

As the controversy faded, the logo continued to shape discussion of Cracker Barrel's turnaround. By the time define public discussion of her tenure. It offered an easy explanation for a leadership change that followed months of public criticism.

The sequence of events points somewhere else. Cracker Barrel had launched a three-year turnaround months before the logo appeared, after slowing traffic, falling retail sales and a sharp decline in profits prompted management to overhaul nearly every part of the business. Investor pressure and uneven financial performance continued to shape that turnaround long after the logo dominated public attention, even though Cracker Barrel has never linked Masino's departure to the redesign.

## Cracker Barrel was already trying to fix a weakening business

In May 2024, months before the logo redesign, Cracker Barrel unveiled a three-year plan to improve restaurant operations, refresh menus, expand digital capabilities and update the guest experience. Executives also across the initiative. The announcement came alongside a warning that weaker-than-expected guest traffic would weigh on financial results.

During fiscal 2024, comparable restaurant sales slipped 0.1%, while net income fell nearly 59%, from $99.1m to $40.9m.

Masino was already facing pressure when the logo controversy hit. Activist investor Biglari Holdings had spent years criticizing the company's leadership, arguing that management had failed to reverse declining performance. The redesign gave critics a highly visible example of the broader case they were already making against management.

Fiscal 2025 produced the strongest evidence yet that the turnaround was gaining traction. Comparable restaurant sales rose 5.4% in the fourth quarter and Cracker Barrel reported its first annual increase in adjusted Ebitda since launching the plan.

Fiscal 2026 undid much of that progress. The company opened the year with a net loss of $24.6m before results

The board was left weighing genuine operational progress against another year of uneven financial performance. Masino's departure was announced on July 27, while that picture was still evolving, leaving no single financial result that neatly explained the leadership change.

Financial performance rarely became the focus of the public discussion.

## Why a logo overshadowed everything else

The updated logo simplified a design that had grown more detailed over the decades, trading illustrated linework for a flatter mark. At the same time, Cracker Barrel began testing brighter restaurant interiors that reduced some of the country-store aesthetic. Customers encountered those changes every time they passed a restaurant or walked through its front door. Menu changes, operational improvements and technology investments went largely unnoticed by comparison.

disappearing before they understand why they feel different about a brand.

“Consumers don’t experience brands through strategy decks. They notice when something feels different long before they can explain why. It’s usually something they were familiar with that has gone missing.”

Cracker Barrel’s roadside signs, front-porch rocking chairs, country store and walls covered with antiques have long helped customers recognize the brand before they’ve even sat down to eat. The Old Timer served the same purpose. Removing him altered one of the company’s most familiar visual cues.

Allen Adamson, founder of BrandSimple Consulting, believes Cracker Barrel removed too many of the visual cues customers associated with the brand.

“Right on the diagnosis, wrong on the dosage,” he says. “Everything that had made Cracker Barrel look like Cracker Barrel got removed and what replaced it could have been any chain in any strip mall.”

who might otherwise never have noticed a restaurant logo change. Within days, Cracker Barrel restored the previous logo and suspended further rollout of its remodel program after testing four restaurants. Adamson believes the reversal created a problem that followed Masino for the rest of her tenure.

## What the redesign came to represent

For brand leadership expert and author of What Great Brands Do, Denise Lee Yohn, the biggest mistake wasn't updating the logo. It was allowing a visual change to become the first thing customers experienced.

"It doesn't seem that it was prepared for the backlash," she says. "It either didn't do the research or ignored the findings. In either case, it should have known that people generally resist change and many brands have failed at rebranding because they underestimate the connection people have to familiar brand symbols.

"It should have been prepared to counter the outrage. It wasn't wrong to make the change, but it should have anticipated the reaction. Once the damage had been

Yohn's point echoes the timeline of Cracker Barrel's turnaround. Customers encountered the logo before they saw updated menus, operational improvements or investments in technology. Once the redesign became the public face of the company's strategy, every setback risked being viewed through that same lens.

Whether the redesign influenced the board's decision to replace Masino remains known only inside Cracker Barrel's boardroom. Adamson doesn't think it needed to.

"The rebrand didn't break the business," he says. "Sales were improving and the stock had come back. What it broke was the CEO's ability to lead. It reversed the logo. You can't reverse the association."

Cracker Barrel has never said the logo cost Masino her job. The public record points to a more complicated story, one in which a redesign became the public face of business problems that had begun long before the Old Timer disappeared.