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Fast-food lives up to expectations for cash-strapped consumers

SAN CLEMENTE, CALIF. — At a time when consumers are looking for ways to get more bang for their bucks, the fast-food industry as a whole has improved customer satisfaction. In 2008, 13 percent of fast-food chains posted *statistically significant* improvement in customer satisfaction compared with 2007. Over half of monitored fast-food chains had a higher overall customer satisfaction rating compared with 2007, according to restaurant researcher Sandelman & Associates.

Regional fast-food brands, such as In-N-Out Burger, Raising Cane's, Firehouse Subs, Taco Tote, Giordano's Pizza and Pei Wei, continue to capture the highest customer satisfaction ratings, according to Sandelman & Associates.

In-N-Out Burger, the hamburger chain in a few Western states with an oversized cult following, receives top honors in Sandelman & Associates' **2008 Quick-Track Awards of Excellence**. Impressively, 60 percent of recent customers rated their last visit "excellent" overall. Raising Cane's finished a close second. A fast-casual upstart that is poised to grow rapidly, Raising Cane's specializes in providing high-quality fried chicken tenders and a variety of dipping sauces in a comfortable, casual setting. Raising Cane's has a small base of users compared with the fast-food giants, but 59 percent of those who recently patronized the chain rated their last visit "excellent" overall. In all, 141 quick-service chains were monitored by Sandelman & Associates in 2008.

The **Top 10 chains** rated "Excellent" overall in Sandelman & Associates' Quick-Track study are:

Quick-Service Restaurant Chain	Home Base	% "excellent" overall rating for last occasion
1. In-N-Out Burger	Irvine, Calif.	60%
2. Raising Cane's	Baton Rouge, La.	59%
3. Giordano's Pizza	Chicago	56%
4. Chick-fil-A	Atlanta	55%
5. Panera Bread	St. Louis	54%
6. Chipotle	Denver	52%
7. Pei Wei	Scottsdale, Ariz.	51%
8. Firehouse Subs	Jacksonville, Fla.	51%
9. Taco Tote	El Paso, Texas	50%
10. Qdoba	Wheat Ridge, Colo.	49%

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“Clearly fast-food users are very satisfied with the overall dining experience,” says Bob Sandelman, CEO and founder of Sandelman & Associates. “Our Awards of Excellence winners, many of whom are smaller, regional brands, are raising the bar for the fast-food giants. And this customer satisfaction improvement is just what the economy ordered.”

Awards of Excellence are given not only for overall satisfaction but also for different aspects of the dining experience, such as taste of the food, speed of service and value for the money. Southern California’s In-N-Out Burger maintains its cultlike following partly because of its tasty food: the chain has the highest “excellent” rating on taste of the food. But it also garners top-rated scores for quality of the ingredients, friendliness of the staff, accuracy in filling orders, and being “a place for someone like me.” In all, In-N-Out finished in the Top 3 on eight of 15 attributes tracked.

The chain with the most U.S. units, Subway, earns top rating for healthy and nutritious food. Sales leader McDonald’s is best when it comes to appeal to kids. Little Caesars garners the top spot for value and affordability.

Upstart Raising Cane’s shines when it comes to service, garnering Top 3 “excellent” ratings on temperature of the food and accuracy in filling orders. Firehouse Subs, a sub sandwich favorite in the Southeast, finishes in the Top 3 on four characteristics: Taste or flavor of the food, quality of the ingredients, appeal to kids and temperature of the food.

The awards are based on the quarterly syndicated Quick-Track® research program conducted by Sandelman & Associates, a San Clemente, Calif.-based market research firm that tracks consumer trends for the restaurant industry. The Quick-Track Awards of Excellence are based on ratings provided by the study’s respondents on fast-food chains they visited in the past three months. In all, Quick-Track surveyed more than 93,800 quick-service restaurant users in 75 U.S. markets during 2008.

Information from this press release must be accompanied by a statement identifying Sandelman & Associates as the publisher and Quick-Track as the source. The information contained in this press release cannot be used for advertising, public relations or promotional purposes without the express prior written consent of Sandelman & Associates. *For more findings, call Paul Clarke at (847) 277-7603 or E-mail paul@sandelman.com.*

About The Study

Quick-Track® is a syndicated research study that tracks key consumer behavioral and attitudinal measures for all major fast-food and pizza chains in individual markets. This research program has been conducted on a quarterly basis since 1988 by Sandelman & Associates, a San Clemente, Calif.-based market research firm. During 2008, Quick-Track surveys were conducted in 75 major

markets across the U.S. among a total sample of 93,800 fast-food users. Respondents provide an overall rating of their last purchase occasion for each tracked chain they have patronized in the past three months. They also rate selected chains they have patronized in the past three months on 15 key attributes that define a chain's image, including food, service, cleanliness, convenience and value. A five-point rating scale is used, with "1" being "poor" and "5" being "excellent." The scores reported equal the percentage of patrons giving an "excellent" rating (top-box score). To ensure reliability, data is reported only for those chains that were rated by at least 150 past-three-month users. For some chains, the sample of respondents providing an overall rating was sufficient, but the base providing ratings on specific attributes was below the 150 minimum requirement and attribute ratings for those chains are not included in the report. Importance ratings for the same 15 attributes are provided by the quarterly Quick-Track National study, which was conducted among 2,400 quick-service restaurant users in 2008. Respondents rate the importance of each attribute in their selection of a fast-food or pizza restaurant, with "1" being "not at all important" and "5" being "extremely important."