Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Chipotle

As of April 28, 2026

Condition: Under treatment

More restaurants, fewer visits

Chipotle has recovered from a brand crisis before. After food safety outbreaks that began in 2015, a new chief executive rebuilt sales around convenience. The 2025 problem was quieter. The chain kept opening restaurants, but fewer guests visited the ones it already had. As of April 28, 2026, Chipotle has a new growth plan and a new chief brand officer on the way. This check-up looks at what the brand rebuilt and what it now has to rebuild.

Key takeaways

- In 2025 Chipotle opened 334 restaurants, but comparable transactions fell 2.9%. Growth came from new locations, not more visits.
- The brand has come back once before. After the food safety outbreaks, sales rebuilt under Brian Niccol, with digital sales up 90.3% and comparable sales up 11.1% in 2019.
- Guests are not feeling the value. Chipotle says it is priced 20% to 30% below fast-casual peers, yet visits fell as lower-income and younger guests pulled back.
- Since Niccol left in August 2024, Chipotle has cut its 2025 outlook three times and changed brand leaders. We would judge the 2026 plan by one measure: visits.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Visits	Falling. Comparable transactions down 2.9% in 2025.
Value perception	Weak. A price gap guests don't notice.
Core guest	Pulling back. Lower-income and younger guests are visiting less.
Convenience	Strong. Digital ordering and Chipotlanes from the last recovery.
Brand leadership	Rebuilding. A new chief brand officer from June 1, 2026.

Timeline

When	What happened
2015 to 2018	Food-borne illness outbreaks sicken more than 1,100 people.
2016	Comparable restaurant sales fall 20.4%.
Mar 2018	Brian Niccol, formerly CEO of Taco Bell, becomes chief executive.
2019	Digital sales grow 90.3% to 18% of sales; comparable sales rise 11.1%.
Aug 2024	Niccol leaves to run Starbucks; Scott Boatwright later succeeds him.
Oct 2025	Chipotle cuts its 2025 outlook for the third time.
Jan 2026	Brand chief Chris Brandt leaves.
Feb 2026	Chipotle launches its five-part Recipe for Growth plan.
Apr 27, 2026	Fernando Machado is named chief brand officer, starting June 1.

What happened: more restaurants, fewer visits

On paper, 2025 was another growth year. Chipotle opened 334 company-owned restaurants and ended the year with 4,056 locations. Underneath, the vital signs moved the other way. Comparable restaurant sales fell 1.7% and comparable transactions fell 2.9%. In the second quarter alone, transactions fell 4.9%.

A chain that adds locations while each one serves fewer guests can report growth for a long time before the problem shows. That is why we put visits and repeat purchase next to sales in any set

of marketing KPIs.

The last recovery: convenience after a crisis

Chipotle has recovered from worse. The Justice Department said the company was implicated in at least five outbreaks between 2015 and 2018 that sickened more than 1,100 people. In 2016, comparable restaurant sales fell 20.4%.

Brian Niccol, formerly CEO of Taco Bell, became chief executive in March 2018. Much of the fix ran through convenience. In 2019, digital sales grew 90.3% to 18.0% of sales, comparable sales rose 11.1% and the company had 66 Chipotlanes, its drive-through lanes for digital orders, by year-end. In August 2024 Niccol left to run Starbucks.

The diagnosis: the core guest, value and leadership

- **The core guest is pulling back.** Nation's Restaurant News reported that households earning under $100,000 account for 40% of sales. CEO Scott Boatwright told analysts the consumer slowdown was affecting the business in a meaningful way. In October 2025 the company cut its outlook for the third time that year.
- **Value guests don't feel.** Boatwright said Chipotle sits at a 20% to 30% discount to fast-casual peers, yet visits still fell while the average check rose 1.2%. If guests do not notice a price gap, it does little work, a point we cover in our guide to pricing strategy.
- **Gaps in brand leadership.** Niccol's exit took away the executive most tied to the recovery. Brand chief Chris Brandt left in January 2026, weeks before the new plan launched.

The treatment: the 2026 plan

In February, Chipotle launched a five-part "Recipe for Growth" strategy with refreshed brand messaging, menu innovation, technology and a relaunched rewards program. A national TV spot, "Choices," contrasts its ingredients with frozen, factory-produced fast food. The company expects about flat comparable sales for 2026. On April 27 it named Fernando Machado, a former chief marketing officer of Restaurant Brands International, as chief brand officer from June 1.

We would hold the plan to one measure: comparable transactions. The rewards relaunch should be judged by how many lapsed guests come back, the centre of any customer retention strategy, not by sign-ups.

Lessons for your marketing

1. Track visits per location next to total sales. New locations can hide a falling visit rate.
2. Make value visible. A price gap guests don't notice does little work.
3. Convenience can rebuild a brand after a crisis, but it still needs upkeep.
4. When the leader who rebuilt a brand leaves, write down what worked and keep the brand roles filled.
5. Judge a loyalty program by how many lapsed guests come back, not by sign-ups.

The doctor will see you now.

Book a free marketing check-up at marketingdoctor.ca/contact. We'll examine your marketing, show you what's holding growth back and prescribe what to fix first.

Sources

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