Introduction

Truett Cathy stood beside me on the sideline of the Georgia Dome with seventy-two thousand cheering college football fans surrounding us. For sixteen straight years, Truett, founder of Chick-fil-A, had stood on that field just before kickoff while plush Cows parachuted from the rafters, an inflatable Cow guided a blimp with an *Eat Mor Chikin* sign inside the dome, and often, his son Dan played the national anthem on his trumpet. The Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl had become something of a family affair, with fans, Cows, players, and coaches all together in the dome for a few hours of fun and football.

This game, December 31, 2012, was different. Truett was ninety-one years old, and I didn't know how many more bowl or Chick-fil-A Kickoff Games he might participate in. Also, we were deeply engaged in negotiations for Atlanta to be chosen as one of the host cities for the College Football Playoff (CFP) beginning after the 2014 season.

If Atlanta were to be selected, then the Chick-fil-A Bowl would host a CFP semifinal game every three years and two top-twenty teams in the other years. The National Championship game would also be in the mix for Atlanta. Chick-fil-A, including the Cows and our food, would become part of the experience for fans attending all seven of the CFP games, and our ads would be in heavy rotation on all seven of the national telecasts, introducing those renegade Cows to legions of new fans. Truett and I stood on the sideline and on the cusp of something altogether different and new for the Chick-fil-A brand.

I spoke loudly so he could hear me over the noise of the crowd. “Truett, your decision sixteen years ago made this possible,” I said. He looked up, and I reminded him of the day when the Chick-fil-A executive committee was deadlocked on whether the company should become the first title sponsor of the Peach Bowl. Truett cast the deciding vote in favor and opened the door to marketing opportunities and partnerships with college football that catapulted Chick-fil-A to national brand status. In the intervening years, the number of stores had almost tripled to 1,683 (in 2012), and system-wide annual sales had grown eightfold to more than $4.6 billion.

We got a signal from the officials, and Truett walked out to the fifty-yard line for the coin toss with the captains from Clemson and LSU. He and I loved that moment, especially the energy of the cheering crowd while he stood among those huge college football players. Looking up at the tens of thousands in the stands, we both appreciated the impact and scale of the chain he had started forty-five years earlier. The customers visiting Chick-fil-A restaurants on a single day across the country could fill more than *thirty* Georgia Domes. But Truett didn’t spend his time thinking about sales volume and customers in the aggregate. Big numbers didn’t impress him. They were nothing but a scorecard, never his “why.” He was more interested in the individual encounter—one customer face-to-face with one restaurant Operator or team member. For thirty-one years I watched Truett make thousands of those one-to-one connections. And believe me, I was one of them.

My role, as chief marketing officer and executive vice president at Chick-fil-A, was to provide the tools and the strategic architecture to build the Chick-fil-A brand. Truett provided the heart. I saw from my first day on the job that Truett had instincts, wisdom, and the grace for branding beyond anything I had seen or could imagine. Especially grace.

Nobody knew better than Truett that *grace* is the Chick-fil-A brand. We might attract new customers every day through marketing and advertising, but he insisted we maintain those relationships through grace that can take many forms in a fast-food restaurant: a friendly smile, eye contact, a personal connection, genuine interest in every person. He not only insisted on it, but he modeled and created a culture of grace.

If his business demonstrated grace and graciousness, then maybe in the process, people would discover the truth of what he believed. But he was not going to lead with his faith. He reminded us, Chick-fil-A is not a church or a ministry: “I’m not going to put scripture on packaging or on the bottom of cups. We’re not going to put evangelical material in our restaurants. I want people to discover what we believe because of how we treat them. Jesus didn’t say, ‘I expect you to be a bullhorn.’ He said, ‘I expect you to be salt. I expect you to be light.’”

Being closed on Sundays was the most overt “pronouncement” Truett would make. When he stood in front of audiences and said, “I have never seen a conflict between biblical principles and good business practice,” he was attempting to live out grace and truth—and grace came before truth. Through his business and his life, he wanted healthy relationships where he could influence a few hundred teenagers, eventually a few thousand campers every year, and then tens of thousands of young team members in restaurants. Those were opportunities he probably never dreamed would happen.

I saw alignment in his commitment and my desire for my spiritual walk. I saw hope for me to have a career where I would not be in conflict, theologically or in principle, with the man I was working for. Hope, in an environment where I could live out my biblical values. Where my career was not just a job but a platform to serve others and to serve Christ, not as an evangelist or a preacher or a teacher, but as a businessman attempting to live out the gospel of grace and truth.

Chick-fil-A is built on biblical values and principles that were fundamentally rooted in its founder and that play out through a business that serves and values people and tries to honor all. In 1946, Truett created this environment at his Dwarf Grill, and he carried it into Chick-fil-A restaurants and even to Chick-fil-A events.

Culture is the fertile ground that helps to grow a brand. A strong, clear, and understood culture sets up the growth of a great brand. A weak, unclear culture will always lead to a weak brand. Stated another way, a culture that is endearing to associates and customers results in an endearing and enduring brand. Conversely, a culture that is unsure of its emotional vision and values will never yield an endearing and enduring brand.

Early in my career, working with Texas Instruments, Six Flags Over Georgia, and Chick-fil-A, I operated in the paradigm that the most important things affecting my success in serving my employer were smart and innovative marketing, brand strategies, and programs. I was consumed by this dominant and hard-driving premise. And sure enough, those things *were* important and played major roles in the success I enjoyed. With time, however, I discovered something that could complement or even *trump* ideas and execution: *the culture of the business.*

The dominant strategies and initiatives that have helped to make Chick-fil-A what and who it is today grew out of the culture established by Truett Cathy and are described by its brand essence: “Where good meets gracious.”

With this book I hope to honor God’s favor not only on my life and my career but on Chick-fil-A as well. This is a story that none of us could have dreamed or orchestrated in our own strength or wisdom. At times, it was like an out-of-body experience, watching the events unfold.

I am so grateful for the privilege to have served Chick-fil-A, its Operators (restaurant franchisees), and Truett in a culture that proved to be fertile soil for growing a great brand. Along that journey, I discovered it was fertile soil not only for my professional growth but also my personal and spiritual growth.

This book is my story of that discovery and journey.

ONE

The Formation of a Brand

Great brands grow from great cultures, and as chief marketing officer at Chick-fil-A for almost thirty-five years, I was indeed operating in great cultural soil.

Truett Cathy had a sincere desire to honor God and have a positive influence on every person he came in contact with. Before the product and profits came relationships with people and with God. When Truett felt he had a biblical insight on an issue, whether it related to people or money or leadership, he tried to humbly and quietly apply that insight. Prudence. Patience. Hard work. Love. Forgiveness. Generosity. These values served Chick-fil-A well.

The year he passed away, 2014, the chain had grown to 1,887 restaurants with $5.7 billion in sales. In the subsequent two years, sales grew by another billion dollars per year, and the culture he created allowed people to continue to thrive. Today, nearly one hundred thousand people work throughout the Chick-fil-A chain, serving more than 3 million customers every day, or 1.1 billion per year. Its tremendous popularity is evident when a new store opens: people camp outside the night before to be among the first one hundred customers of a new restaurant because those customers receive free Chick-fil-A for a year.

Through the years, the leadership team established guiding principles that shaped how they made decisions—principles that were the ingredients of the culture. These provide the framework for the brand itself and for this book, and that framework begins with the Chick-fil-A Corporate Purpose:

To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A.

This is our "why." And it's carried out even in the most iconic visual connected with Chick-fil-A: the beloved Cows. One of our former marketing consultants, Alf Nucifora, noted, "The [Cow] campaign offers an interesting insight into Chick-fil-A's corporate style." After noting that one of Chick-fil-A's strengths lies in their commitment to a decision or direction once it is created, "like their Corporate Purpose or Operator concept," he continued, "they don't waver. They don't shift. That is refreshing, and from a marketing standpoint, it can be very valuable, as you can see with the Cow campaign. They have resisted the urge to gussie it up, to change it, to get rid of it, or to do the wrong things to it."

The Corporate Purpose statement, created in 1982, grew out of a time of financial crisis when the national economy was in the midst of a serious recession and same-store sales fell for the first time ever. Capturing it in writing and disseminating it around the company kept our focus on why we were in business and on the deeply held beliefs that fed our culture.

Truett often talked about stewardship of talent, money, and influence, which belong to God who entrusts them to us. Serving as a steward rather than an owner of the assets gave Truett a freedom to express his generosity by sharing God's gifts with his associates and neighbors. He impacted many lives, and his model deeply affected me.

As Chick-fil-A grew, with the Corporate Purpose as our cultural foundation, we didn't think in terms of revolutionary initiatives for building the brand. Others might look at the Cow campaign, or college football, or the introduction of the grilled sandwich as strategic milestones, but we saw them as more than that. The real journey was moving from a sandwich-focused operational restaurant chain to an experiential brand, as we came to understand how Cathy family-style hospitality and relational marketing could be executed in a fast-food restaurant. Out of that understanding came our mission: "Be REMARKable." We wanted every customer's brand encounter to be remarkable, to leave an above-average, positive impression.