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Chick-fil-A's Satisfaction Reign Over Restaurant Segment Reaches 7 Years, but its Lead Is Shrinking, ACSI Data Show

ANN ARBOR, Mich., (June 29, 2021) – Customer satisfaction with full-service and limited-service restaurants was already reeling before the pandemic turned both industries upside down. Yet, even in the face of billions of dollars in lost revenue, there's reason to feel encouraged.

According to the [American Customer Satisfaction Index \(ACSI®\) Restaurant Study 2020-2021](#), the fast food category holds steadfast for customer satisfaction while full-service restaurants rebound a point. For the Accommodation and Food Services sector overall, satisfaction dips just 0.4% to a score of 77.6 on the ACSI's 0-100 scale – a much-needed stabilization following the sector's larger decline one year ago.

The pandemic forced restaurants to rethink the way they do business or risk being shuttered. The changes they made have paid off for customers, and they're now likely here to stay.

“People are slowly starting to enjoy sitting down at restaurants again, but don't discount the value of convenience,” says David VanAmburg, Managing Director at the ACSI. “During the pandemic, folks got a taste for what it's like to have food from their favorite restaurants delivered right to their door. And now that they've gotten used to this service, there's no going back. Restaurants need to continue to give customers all the options they've become accustomed to over the last year and a half. If not, they might grab a bite somewhere else.”

Interestingly enough, despite a business model not designed to thrive when takeout and delivery become paramount, it's full-service restaurants, not fast food outfits, that have customers ready for seconds.

Smaller full-service restaurants lead, while LongHorn Steakhouse, Olive Garden, and Texas Roadhouse hold three-way tie for second

After slipping the previous year, customer satisfaction with full-service restaurants bounces back, climbing 1.3% to an ACSI score of 80.

The group of smaller restaurants takes over the top spot, up 1% to 81. Last year's industry leader LongHorn Steakhouse falls 1% into a three-way tie for second place with Olive Garden (up 1%)

and Texas Roadhouse (unchanged) at 80.

Cracker Barrel's decline continues, dropping 1% to an ACSI score of 78. The Southern-themed restaurant chain is now even with both Outback Steakhouse (unchanged) and Red Robin (up 3%).

Five full-service restaurants score 77, including ACSI newcomer The Cheesecake Factory, Applebee's (unchanged), Chili's (up 3%), Red Lobster (down 3%), and TGI Fridays (down 1%).

Buffalo Wild Wings debuts near the bottom of the industry, tying Denny's (unchanged) with an ACSI score of 76. Last place, however, belongs to IHOP, which scores 74 in its first year in the study.

Chick-fil-A holds onto its fast food crown; Subway stumbles

Customer satisfaction with the limited-service (fast food) restaurant industry holds steady at 78.

Chick-fil-A tops the industry – and all restaurants – for the seventh consecutive year despite inching back 1% to an ACSI score of 83.

The group of smaller fast food purveyors remains unchanged at 80, tying pizza leader Domino's, which improves 1% year over year. KFC (unchanged) and Starbucks (up 1%) are next at 79, just ahead of Panera Bread (down 1%) and Pizza Hut (up 1%) at 78. Newcomer Five Guys scores 78 as well, outperforming the other burger chains in its first ACSI appearance.

Four chains slip to a score of 77: Arby's (down 3%), Chipotle Mexican Grill (down 4%), Dunkin' (down 3%), and Papa John's (down 1%).

Burger King and Little Caesars both hold steady with ACSI scores of 76, meeting Panda Express, which makes its ACSI debut. Subway goes off the rails, tumbling 5% to 75.

Dairy Queen premieres near the bottom of the industry with a score of 74, tying Taco Bell (unchanged). Four fast food restaurants come in just below at 73: Jack in the Box (unchanged), Popeyes (down 1%), Sonic (down 1%), and Wendy's (down 4%).

McDonald's remains in the basement of the category with a flat ACSI score of 70.

Customers prefer full-service experience over fast food dining

In terms of the customer experience, full-service restaurants have the edge. In fact, the industry overall outperforms the limited-service category across nearly all customer experience benchmarks measured by the ACSI.

Customers agree that sit-down chains are far superior to fast food outlets when it comes to restaurant layout and cleanliness (86 to 82), food quality (86 to 82), food variety (84 to 79), and

staff courtesy and helpfulness (85 to 82).

Additionally, orders are more accurate (88 to 84) at full-service restaurants. These establishments offer a wider variety of beverages (82 to 78) and superior beverage quality (84 to 81).

Full-service restaurants also provide better mobile app quality (85 to 83). In terms of reliability, however, fast-food apps mirror full-service apps (both at 82).

The [ACSI Restaurant Study 2020-2021](#) is based on interviews with 19,423 customers, chosen at random and contacted via email between April 1, 2020, and March 29, 2021. Follow the ACSI on [LinkedIn](#) and Twitter at [@theACSI](#).

AMERICAN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX: RESTAURANTS 2020-2021



80

Full Service
+1.3%

78

Limited Service
0.0%



RESTAURANT ACSI RANKINGS SNAPSHOT

Chick-fil-A (83) delivers top satisfaction score for 7th straight year
McDonald's (70) still lacks the love with lowest score among chains

IHOP DEBUTS AT THE BOTTOM

Smaller full-service chains grab the ACSI lead while newcomers lag behind

All Others	81	+1%
The Cheesecake Factory	77	New
Buffalo Wild Wings	76	New
IHOP	74	New



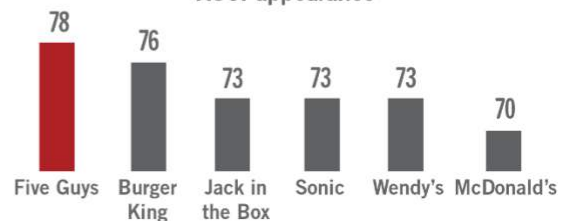
BIG ACSI GAINS FOR TWO FULL-SERVICE CHAINS

Red Robin	Chili's
+3% 78	+3% 77



FIVE STARS FOR FIVE GUYS

Five Guys wins the fast food burger battle in first ACSI appearance



LIMITED GAINS AMONG LIMITED-SERVICE CHAINS

Domino's	Starbucks	Pizza Hut
+1% 80	+1% 80	+1% 78

FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE BEATS FAST FOOD DINING

