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Wing Zone weaves festival win into online marketing

QA The co-founders of Atlanta-based Wing Zone went to this year's Buffalo Wing Festival and got a lot more than just a lousy T-shirt. In fact, Matt Friedman and Adam Scott went to the annual event in Buffalo, N.Y., to be enshrined in the festival's Hall of Flame. Their 100-unit chain also left with first-place honors in the festival's "creative sweet" category and a third-place finish in the hot-sauce category.

Friedman and Scott spread the word of Wing Zone's achievements at the festival by handing out dozens of "Wing Zone Poked Me" T-shirts, which prompt fans to keep the dialogue going on the chain's Facebook page, where the founders engage guests with poll questions and contests for more Wing Zone merchandise.

"We extended our interactions



Wing Zone co-founders Adam Scott, left, and Matt Friedman

outside of a two-day festival by creating lasting connections through the power of networking," Friedman said of the T-shirt tactic. "Festivals like this extend our awareness and help our new franchisees by giving them an immediate fanatical following when they open in a new market."

How do you translate the Hall of Flame recognition to Wing Zone's brand messaging?

Friedman: By taking two awards, first, it gets our entire franchisee based pumped up. We'll publicize it in our stores and on the menus. Second, we use that news from a social-media standpoint, which is a huge focus for us. We're able to push that content through our fanatics and followers, letting them know we've won these awards and that they should come in and try these sauces.

It seems like you try to extend the experience between the store and online with T-shirts.

Scott: Because we have these fanatics, we can do targeted specials. We have contests and poll questions almost daily on our [social-media] pages, and it's great to see some of the responses we get and how in-depth

some of our fans delve into this. We send shirts out every day. Not only do our fans promote the brand in their local market, but they continue to push people toward our social-media profiles. All of a sudden, it's a complete snowball effect, and every week our lists grow at an exponential rate.

How do you keep the brand message from getting diluted as you hit your aggressive expansion goals?

Friedman: The best word for it is culture. We started the company 16 years ago as two college students, and our story is told on a regular basis to new employees and customers, on our website and menus. Franchisees coming through our training process, they love telling the history of Wing Zone. Incredible wings for takeout or delivery, usually centered around social events — that's what the brand's all about. We preach that every day.

Scott: Our whole online presence is tied together. Social media is tied into our e-mail marketing and into online ordering. Online is truly the future of food delivery. By linking all three together in a seamless way, we can build guest loyalty by offering great specials. That really keeps people engaged.

— Mark Brandau