

Austin Douglas

Tuttle highlights people-first approach in Whataburger marketing strategy

Donna Tuttle, Vice President of Marketing and Communications at Whataburger, shared about the importance of authentic storytelling, leadership, and connecting with audiences during a recent speech on campus.

“The truth of the matter is, no matter what you do, storytelling, and authentic storytelling, is the key to everything,” Tuttle said. “If you create an ad, just because somebody has a clever idea, but it doesn't tie back to your branding, and you don't remember what the brand is, then you have not won. So, everything we do has to be ground in storytelling, authentic storytelling.”

The company leans into its nostalgic appeal while also embracing modern strategies on social media to remain relevant. Tuttle recalled National Whataburger Day 2023, which had significant online engagement, including 80,000 downloads of the Whataburger app, as an example of the brand's authentic storytelling.

Tuttle joined Whataburger in 2017 and has since prioritized listening to customers to shape marketing campaigns and initiatives. She highlighted the significance of understanding audiences deeply.

“How could we possibly know what customers want if we aren't asking them?” she said.

Tuttle emphasized the importance of keeping a competitive edge in the ever changing fast-food industry. She notes it is important to keep an eye on competition to stay relevant and better shape their own marketing approach.

The focus on community engagement extends to employees, whom Tuttle refers to as “family members.” She referenced the importance of treating employees well to ensure positive customer interaction.

“If you don’t treat your people right, they’re not gonna treat your customers right,” she said.

Sydney Flinner, a Baylor journalism student who attended the speech, shared her thoughts regarding Tuttle’s emphasis on fostering a sense of belonging among employees.

“The thing that stood out most to me was the way she emphasized the family aspect of Whataburger,” Flinner said. “It’s important to them that their employees have that sense of belonging because it influences the way that they work.”

Tuttle also spoke about the need to “dig deeper” for truths in both journalism and marketing, drawing on her experience as a journalist before transitioning into a marketing and communications role at Whataburger.

“As a journalist, you’re always digging for the truth,” she said.

This mindset informs her team's work, whether it involves creating an authentic marketing campaign or vetting possible brand ambassadors.

Russell Rankin, an adjunct lecturer in journalism and director of marketing and communication at Baylor's Hankamer School of Business, appreciated Tuttle's focus on human connection.

"I was struck by the point, and she touched on it in so many different places over the talk, about connecting with people," Rankin said. "People are what make it happen. It's not about a product, or anything else, it's about the people that you work with. So, not that you're selling to, but the people that are a part of your family. That's important."

Tuttle's strategy also includes knowing the other companies in the market and using data to anticipate customer preferences.

"We have to know what our competitors are doing...and use that data to move us forward," Tuttle said.

This approach has helped Whataburger build a loyal customer base and expand its reach over 1,000 locations across 16 states.

Tuttle reflected on her leadership philosophy, saying her role is to develop others.

“I really see my role as developing people and looking for the next me, and I see a few of them out there right now,” she said.