

Pret a Manger: Simple Ingredients for Brand Success



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Union Square, New York, lunch time. My wife Poh Lan and I had just bought a few books from the enormous Barnes and Noble book store. Hunger was quickly rolling in, like dark, ominous tropical thunderclouds. We turned right as we left the store and crossed the road. We found ourselves in front of Pret a Manger, a very inviting sandwich shop. We enjoyed the experience of eating delicious, healthy sandwiches in a very pleasant, casual environment. By the time we had left this shop, we were two people among the 90+% of customers who say they will recommend Pret to a friend...or in your case, to my readers.

I was so taken by the experience that I decided to find out more about this company. As it turns out, Pret a Manger (translated from French to English: “ready to eat”) is a successful UK-based fresh sandwich chain with over 200 shops in the UK. It has about 25 shops in the US and Hong Kong. I contacted the Pret head office and, after a few emails, was put into contact with Sarah Lee, MD of Pret a Manger in Hong Kong.

Sarah’s early work experience was in the hotel and restaurant industry. This is a tough business to be in, involving long hours, and weekends with 2am finishes. And then, in 1997, Sarah discovered Pret a Manger. “I found this dynamic company where you work 8 hours a day with some amazing people. It was absolutely fantastic,” she said. Pret in Hong Kong is Sarah’s baby – she shifted there in 2002 to open Pret’s first shops in the Asian market and became MD in 2008.

Driven by a Mission

I was interested in the key factors behind the Pret brand experience. As it turned out, Pret’s success revolves around a few simple and wholesome ingredients. “The most important is the food,” said Sarah. “We all want to be best in class and we all want to be innovative in what we do. We try not to launch products for the sake of it, but, rather, we try to give customers what they really, really want – and that is beautiful, nutritious sandwiches.” It was just the start of the interview and Sarah had me salivating on the feast of “success clues” that I was being served. She spoke passionately about the product. But, if we delve a little deeper, she is driven by something more meaningful - a simple Mission which has not changed since Julian Metcalfe and Sinclair Beecham opened the first Pret a Manger shop in 1986. They founded Pret based on the proposition of providing fresh, wholesome, handmade, sandwiches that are natural without the use of chemicals, additives or preservatives. And, weaved into Sarah’s language is a strong customer focus and admiration for both her company and her team members. These are great fundamentals that are the building blocks of successful companies. By now I was excited to learn more about how Pret has built its brand over the last 24 years.

**Employees
are driven by
a simple
Mission that
has not
changed
since 1986**

The founder,
Julian
Metcalf,
leads by
example

“No good
company can
operate
without
people who
are proud of
what they
do...”

Relentless focus on quality

Julian Metcalfe still works in the business and leads by example. “Julian is relentless about the food. Just good enough is *not* good enough. Our simple chocolate brownie has been changed about 34 times! It’s invigorating and exciting to work for a company that is so eager to improve what we sell,” Sarah said. In this simple statement, Sarah shares another key ingredient to the Pret success recipe – leadership by example. As you will see below, Pret works really hard to keep leadership and management grounded and connected to what is happening at the customer interface.

Focus on people

“After product, the second most important ingredient is our team. No good company can operate without people who are proud of what they do and the company that they work for. Without our people we are nothing,” she said.

The starting point is to get the right people on board. “We recruit people for their confidence and personality, not necessarily for their experience,” she said. “We believe that we can train and coach anyone to achieve their goals if they have the attributes that we want to see,” she continued. I found Sarah’s use of language to be interesting. Rather than talk about the individual achieving the *company’s goals*, she spoke about individuals achieving *their* goals. You learn a lot about a company from the language that its leaders use.

The company looks for 3 core behaviours in its recruits:

- The first is *Teamwork*. Sarah described people who have the makings of being good team members as being sociable, fun and charming.
- The second behaviour is *Clear Thinking* – people who are sensitive, thoughtful, interesting and straight forward. This behaviour is important as Pret wants everyone in the organisation to feel confident to talk to fellow team members or managers.
- The third is *Passion* – that is, people who have pride, ownership, high standards and go the extra mile.

“These 3 behaviours will determine whether a person gets recruited, or not. We have a very good appraisal system that is built around these behaviours. More behaviours are added as you go higher,” she explained.

Buddy systems build a sense of ONE team between head office and operations

Pret puts a lot of effort into training its people. There is training for new starters through to senior managers who have been with the company for many years. There is a comprehensive 10-day training session for every person who joins the company. “It’s a big investment, but it’s definitely worth it,” she said.

Building teamwork between head office and operations

In most companies, there is a divide between head office and operations. But not at Pret. Twice a year, Head Office employees, around the world, from the CEO down spend, a day working as normal shop team members. “We call this our buddy system. It helps head office team members stay in touch with what life is like in the shop,” Sarah explained. “They get to speak with people, talk about how they are feeling and what they are doing. They have a bit of fun and also understand what the team members are going through,” she said. It keeps head office people grounded in the practical realities of the business. “When you are creating a new sandwich in head office, it’s easy to do in a remote environment. But you cannot know how the team member feels and how much hard work it is when you are just working in the head office environment,” she said.

The buddy system helps all facets of the operation. For example, head office Design Department employees get a first hand feel of whether their designs will work for team members and customers. The Communications team will get a better understanding of whether the marketing materials are easy to maintain. All in all, the system helps head office employees think through all possibilities from a shop point of view, a team member’s point of view and from the customer point of view.

The buddy system has a big impact in reinforcing the Pret culture. “It’s incredibly powerful. Team members love it. No matter whether they are new team members or have been there for a long time, they feel that they are valued and that people listen to their opinions,” she continued. “The shops close at 3pm and the buddy may take the group out to socialize together. It helps to build the bonds,” she said.

Everyone – from head office to shop team members – is incentivized to encourage the right behaviours and results

Incentives to encourage desired behaviours

Pret a Manger understands the power of incentives to encourage the desired individual and team behaviours. Everyone from head office through to the shops is incentivized through various forms of bonus and reward and recognition programmes. Sarah explained that one of the most powerful incentives is through the Pret mystery shopper program. Mystery shoppers make weekly visits to every Pret shop. They assess the customer experience eg, the presentation of the food, the tidiness of the shop, whether the team members are engaging and pleasant. If the shop scores a minimum of 90% on the mystery shopper rating, each team member is given a bonus. And if the mystery shopper feels that a team member has delivered above and beyond service, that person gets an “Outstanding Card” and an on-the-spot bonus. In the UK this is 50 pounds. If, over a month, a team gets 100% on the mystery shopper scores and team members get 2 Outstanding Cards, then the company will pay for the whole team to have a night out and will subsidize the team to the tune of 300 pounds! This encourages both teamwork and individual flair and personality in the customer experience.

I’m getting even more excited. Where was Pret a Manger when I was eking out a living as a student? I can see myself now, proudly accepting an extra 50 big ones in my pay packet. It would certainly give me the incentive to keep on my service toes. After all, I wouldn’t know which customer is a mystery shopper, so I would treat every customer as if he or she is the bearer of my next 50 quid!

And there is more! Just imagine yourself wearing a badge of honour for delivering amazing service. Pret goes one step further – the badge of honour is worth money! The company commissioned Tiffany’s, the very upmarket jeweller, to create “Tiffany Stars”. These are given to team members where customers have written in to say that they have done “an amazing job.”

The incentive system helps to create both individual and team excellence. Sarah commented, “All of the incentives help to build strong bonds and strong teamwork which are essential to the operation of a successful shop. The incentive system creates friendly competition between areas. It becomes an exciting and fast moving environment to work in. People are rewarded as individuals and as teams.”

General Managers of each shop are incentivized on a broader range of factors eg, in terms of how well they maintain the right values in the shop. A General Manager can add 30% to his salary in bonuses, and will triple that if he or she is the top manager of the quarter! “I don’t want to sound as if there is money thrown at them. Being a General Manager is a demanding job. One minute you have to have your business hat, on, the next it’s the team hat on and then your customer hat. You are juggling many balls in the air. It’s a demanding job, but hopefully it’s a fulfilling job,” said Sarah.

Having Fun

The Pret culture is focused on teamwork, sharing, caring and communicating. The company has many social events. We make sure that everyone has a good time!” said Sarah. In the UK, there is a company Christmas party and a Summer party and sponsored Friday night drinks for team members. In Hong Kong, where there is a different culture, Pret takes teams out for a dinner every quarter when someone from head office comes to visit. “It’s all about team members enjoying themselves. The social event gets people talking together and keeping the DNA strong and consistent,” she said.

An energetic start to each day

Pret staff start early in the morning – as early as 5am, ready for another day of making hundreds of sandwiches and creating the Pret customer experience. There is a team briefing in each shop at 6.45am each day. This gets the team communicating and energised. There are customer feedback forms in each shop. The General Manager will share any customer feedback from the previous day and the team will talk them through. This meeting also gives the General Manager the opportunity to share information from head office and also to play fun games that aim to drive the right behaviours. For example, to encourage attention to detail, the team might play “spot the mistake” in the shop. Or, if there has been a complaint that it took too long to make the coffee, there might be a coffee making competition. There are fun rewards in the form of, for example, a piece of cake. They are just little things, but they make a big difference to create team energy. Pret provides a catalogue of games, and Managers make others up on the spot. It all helps to keep the communication going and to keep improving a behaviour.

Create opportunities for people to mix socially

Pret shops start every day early...and with fun

The shop environment

A key challenge is to get the right location. And then it's a matter of creating an environment in the shops that will add to the customer experience. Sarah explained that 20 years ago, Pret shops were decked out in trendy stainless steel. This has shifted to wooden floors, wallpaper, carpet and the use of lighting. "The company has learnt over the years how lighting affects your experience when you are in the shop. Over the last few years we have constantly tried to make it better for the customer," said Sarah. The major project in 2009 was making Pret's toilets better for customers...It was called Project Flush!

In conclusion...

When you read the business books, they will say to keep your strategy simple. They will say, "Be driven by a simple Mission." They will say, "Focus on your people and to listen to your customers." Pret does this and more. The result is a brand experience that compels people like me to tell thousands of other people – like you. And, no doubt, one day, you will have the opportunity to savour the Pret customer experience. I have just scratched the surface on Pret a Manger, and am sure that I could write a book on the company. I will leave the last word to Sarah. I asked her to describe the Pret a Manger customer experience. She said, "As a customer, you know that you can rely on us and trust us. You will be greeted by one of the wonderful people behind the tills. Over the years, and across borders the experience remains the same. It's about wonderful food and fantastic service. It has always been there and will always be there. And it will always be delivered by our wonderful people."

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