

## Opening Case: Dunkin' Brands—Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin-Robbins: Making Local Global



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High-tech and digital news may dominate our attention globally, but no matter where you go, people still need to eat. Food is a key part of many cultures. It is part of the bonds of our childhood, creating warm memories of comfort food or favorite foods that continue to whet our appetites. So it's no surprise that sugar and sweets are a key part of our food focus, no matter what the culture. Two of the most visible American exports are the twin brands of Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin-Robbins.

After several ownership changes since its initial founding in 1950, Dunkin' Donuts is today a publicly traded firm called the Dunkin' Brands, consisting of Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin-Robbins, both of which have been sold globally for more than forty years. Today, the firm has almost 21,000 points of distribution in almost fifty countries with \$11.7 billion in global systemwide sales.<sup>[1]</sup>

After an eleven-year hiatus, Dunkin' Donuts returned to Russia in 2010 with the opening of twenty new stores. Under a new partnership, "the planned store openings come 11 years after Dunkin' Donuts pulled out of Russia, following three years of losses exacerbated by a rogue franchisee who sold "liquor and meat pies alongside coffee and crullers."<sup>[2]</sup> Each culture has different engrained habits, particularly in the choices of food and what foods are appropriate for what meals. The more globally-aware businesses are mindful of these issues and monitor their overseas operations and partners. One of the key challenges for many companies operating globally with different resellers, franchisees, and wholly-owned subsidiaries is the ability to control local operations.

This wasn't the first time that Dunkin' had encountered an overzealous local partner who tried to customize operations to meet local preferences and demands. In Indonesia in the 1990s, the company's management was surprised to find that local operators were sprinkling a mild, white cheese on a custard-filled donut. The company eventually approved the local customization since it was a huge success.<sup>[3]</sup>

Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin-Robbins have not always been owned by the same firm. They eventually came under one entity in the late 1980s—an entity that sought to leverage the two brands. One of the overall strategies was to have the morning market covered by Dunkin' Donuts and the afternoon-snack market covered by Baskin-Robbins. It is a strategy that worked well in the United States and was one the company employed as it started operating and expanding in different countries. The company's management was initially unprepared for the wide range of local cultural preferences and habits that would culturally impact its business. In Russia, Japan, China, and most of Asia, donuts, if they were known at all, were regarded more as a sweet type of bakery treat, like an éclair or cream puff. Locals primarily purchased and consumed them at shopping malls as an "impulse purchase" afternoon-snack item and not as a breakfast food.

In fact, in China, there was no equivalent word for "donut" in Mandarin, and European-style baked pastries were not common outside the Shanghai and Hong Kong markets. To further complicate Dunkin' Donuts's entry into China, which took place initially in Beijing, the company name could not even be phonetically spelled in Chinese characters that made any sense, as Baskin-Robbins

had been able to do in Taiwan. After extensive discussion and research, company executives decided that the best name and translation for *Dunkin' Donuts* in China would read *Sweet Sweet Ring* in Chinese characters.

Dunkin' Brands' 31 Flavors found success in Russia.



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Local cultures also impacted flavors and preferences. For Baskin-Robbins, the flavor library is controlled in the United States, but local operators in each country have been the source of new flavor suggestions. In many cases, flavors that were customized for local cultures were added a decade later to the main menus in major markets, including the United States. Mango and green tea were early custom ice cream flavors in the 1990s for the Asian market. In Latin America, *dulce de leche* became a favorite flavor. Today, these flavors are staples of the North American flavor menu.

One flavor suggestion from Southeast Asia never quite made it onto the menu. The durian fruit is a favorite in parts of Southeast Asia, but it has a strong, pungent odor. Baskin-Robbins management was concerned that the strong odor would overwhelm factory operations. (The odor of the durian fruit is so strong that the fruit is often banned in upscale hotels in several Asian countries.) While the durian never became a flavor, the company did concede to making ice cream flavored after the *ube*, a sweetened purple yam, for the Philippine market. It was already offered in Japan, and the company extended it to the Philippines. In Japan, sweet corn and red bean ice cream were approved for local sale and became hot sellers, but the two flavors never made it outside the country.

When reviewing local suggestions, management conducts a market analysis to determine if the global market for the flavor is large enough to justify the investment in research and development and eventual production. In addition to the market analysis, the company always has to make sure they have access to sourcing quality flavors and fruit. Mango proved to be a challenge, as finding the correct fruit puree differed by country or culture. Samples from India, Hawaii, Pakistan, Mexico, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico were taste-tested in the mainland United States. It seems that the mango is culturally regarded as a national treasure in every country where it is grown, and every country thinks its mango is the best. Eventually the company settled on one particular flavor of mango.

A challenging balance for Dunkin' Brands is to enable local operators to customize flavors and food product offerings without diminishing the overall brand of the companies. Russians, for example, are largely unfamiliar with donuts, so Dunkin' has created several items that specifically appeal to Russian flavor preferences for scalded cream and raspberry jam.<sup>[4]</sup>

In some markets, one of the company's brands may establish a market presence first. In Russia, the overall "Dunkin' Brands already ranks as a dessert purveyor. Its Baskin-Robbins ice-cream chain boasts 143 shops there, making it the No. 2 Western restaurant brand by number of stores behind the hamburger chain McDonald's Corp."<sup>16</sup> The strength of the company's ice cream brand is now enabling Dunkin' Brands to promote the donut chain as well.

## Opening Case Exercises

**(AACSB: Ethical Reasoning, Multiculturalism, Reflective Thinking, Analytical Skills)**

1. If you were a manager for Baskin-Robbins, how would you evaluate a request from a local partner in India to add a sugar-cane-flavored ice cream to its menu? What cultural factors would you look at?
2. Do you think Dunkin' Brands should let local operators make their own decisions regarding flavors for ice creams, donuts, and other items to be sold in-country? How would you recommend that the company's global management assess the cultural differences in each market? Should there be one global policy?