



## CASE STUDY

# Sonny's BBQ

From Coupons to Customer Insights: How Sonny's BBQ Achieved Higher-Margin Growth with Thanx

Industry:

**Fast-casual BBQ**

Locations:

**Nearly 100**

Launched with Thanx:

**June 2024**

"With Thanx, we've gained much more control over our marketing spend and the ability to influence specific guest behaviors. For the first time, we're able to reward loyalty in a more intentional way without always relying on deep discounts."

Katie Love, VP of Marketing, Sonny's BBQ





## Background

Sonny's BBQ, the Southeast-based full-service barbecue chain known for its slow-smoked meats and community-first approach, had been in operation for 55 years without a loyalty program. While beloved by regulars, the brand lacked visibility into guest behavior and relied heavily on mass discounts and email promotions. Rising fraud, declining margins, and a growing demand from franchisees for a modern loyalty program and mobile app pushed the brand to evolve.

Thanx helped Sonny's modernize with a seamless, data-rich loyalty program designed to increase frequency, reduce discounts and fraud, and support a more intentional approach to guest engagement—without adding complexity or work effort for marketing.

## The Challenge

Sonny's BBQ relied on a large email list for marketing but lacked loyalty data to understand customer behavior. Frequent deals led to coupon abuse and a high discount rate. Franchisees wanted a mobile app and digital engagement tools, but the brand needed a solution for nearly 100 locations without increased operational burden.

## Strategy and Implementation

VP of Marketing Katie Love led a cross-functional task force, including franchisee operators, to evaluate loyalty platforms. With support from their agency partner Croud, the team conducted an in-depth review of multiple providers.

**“We launched without needing any new hardware. Franchisees were surprised by how easily it could be rolled out. They see this as a profit lever now.”**

Katie Love, VP of Marketing, Sonny's BBQ

**After narrowing the options based on required capabilities, the task force selected Thanx for three key reasons:**

### 01 Simplicity

Thanx offered an intuitive backend dashboard that aligned with the brand's “no-fuss” ethos.

### 02 Transparency

Unlike other competitors' layered add-on model, Thanx offers transparent and straightforward pricing.

### 03 Quick implementation

Thanx led with deep partner integrations and expertise, helping Sonny's move fast without overcomplicating the rollout.



The program launched with a mobile app, a points-per-dollar rewards structure, and segment-based campaign tools. Seasonal campaigns, such as *Sweet Sonny's Summer*, and tier-based BOGO rewards became key tools in shifting guest behavior.

## Driving Incremental Visits

Sonny's has transformed its promotional strategy from broad mass-market discounts to precision-targeted campaigns designed to drive incremental visits from its most valuable guests without heavy discounts. The shift represents a fundamental change in how the brand approaches traffic generation and guest engagement.



## Strategic Campaign Development

The brand developed a year-round promotional calendar with loyalty-exclusive campaigns. Programs like "Free Tea Tuesdays" and seasonal campaigns such as "Sweet Sonny's Summer" and "Smokin' September" are designed specifically for loyalty members, creating exclusivity while driving consistent traffic patterns. Members earn points on every purchase, with additional tier-based rewards unlocking as they reach higher spending levels.

"Sweet Tea Tuesdays are the perfect example of a high-impact campaign—our franchisees love it because it costs us pennies but gets people in the door," said Katie Love. "We needed options that were high perceived value and low operational cost."

Katie Love, VP of Marketing, Sonny's BBQ

## Points-Based Program with Tiered Benefits

The loyalty program operates on a points-earning foundation where guests accumulate points with each visit and purchase. Layered on top are tier-based benefits that unlock additional value for frequent visitors. Top-tier loyalty members receive monthly incentives, such as buy-one-get-one (BOGO) sandwiches, specifically designed to earn one additional visit per month from high-value guests. The program includes targeted promotions for the top two loyalty tiers, recognizing that different customer segments require different strategies.

## From Mass Media to Precision Marketing

Sonny's has dramatically reduced reliance on costly traditional advertising, previously running six TV commercials per year, in favor of targeted, loyalty-driven traffic initiatives. This "surgical approach" to traffic driving enables more precise ROI measurement and better resource allocation, while maximizing the value of both point redemptions and tier-based perks.

## Ongoing Optimization

The team continues to test segment-specific engagement strategies for higher spenders while expanding the promotional calendar to include back-to-school campaigns and other seasonal opportunities. Each campaign is evaluated not just on immediate redemption but on its ability to drive incremental visits, points engagement, and long-term guest value across all tier levels.

## Results



**1%**

### EFFECTIVE DISCOUNT RATE

Dropped from 10% to under 1%, dramatically improving margins.



**4X**

### REDEMPTION RATE

Loyalty member promotions achieved double the redemption rate of previous mass-market campaigns, resulting in a 4x increase in efficiency.



**42%**

### HABITUAL CUSTOMER GROWTH

In the last 90 days, the number of habitual customers has increased by 42%, accompanied by a 37% rise in revenue from those members.



**+15%**

### INCREASE IN DIGITAL REVENUE

Through the implementation of Thanx (as well as Toast, also implemented in the last year), Sonny's BBQ grew its digital revenue by 15% in 6 months.

## Operational Simplicity

Completely eliminated coupon fraud while earning positive franchisee feedback with minimal operational burden.

"For the first time, we're able to reward guests without always giving away margin. That's a big win for us, and for our operators."

Katie Love, VP of Marketing, Sonny's BBQ

## Conclusion

Sonny's BBQ's evolution into a data-driven loyalty program demonstrates the power of outcome-focused guest engagement. This initiative started with the recognition that, after 55 years, it was time to modernize while maintaining their authentic brand values. By eliminating fraud, reducing discount dependency, and creating targeted campaigns that franchisees love, Sonny's built a foundation for sustainable growth that balances guest satisfaction with profitability, setting the stage for continued success across their franchise network.

**Want to drive high-margin revenue and delight franchisees and customers?**

Talk to the loyalty experts at Thanx.

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