



CASE STUDY

How Willie's Icehouse Leverages Industry Benchmarking & Insights to Elevate Restaurant Experience





Case Study
— at a —
GLANCE



Willie's brings the classic Icehouse experience to communities across Texas. The brand began as a humble burger shack in Houston in 1993, and they've been Texas' go-to spot for kicking back with friends and family ever since.

Willie's VP of Marketing, Marty Wadsworth, joined the company in the fall of 2020. "I came from the agency side, working with over 150 restaurant brands that ranged from the size of Raising Cane's to as small as your neighborhood Italian spot," Marty shared.

Marty's agency background gave him the ability to understand priorities and challenges of restaurants across the spectrum. With this knowledge, he would build the best path forward for his client's unique goals. And while the approach would vary, there seemed to be a trend amongst the brands—Black Box Intelligence. "Around 30% of my clients already used at least one Black Box Intelligence product to better understand where they sit within the industry compared to peers."

Knowing benchmarks, both mentally where you're at but also where your competitors are, helps teams make a cohesive decision on where to shift focus: where your team is headed, where your packaging is headed, where your menu innovation is headed. It dictates everything when it comes to brand performance.

When it came time to join Willie's, Marty knew exactly what would help the brand get to its next level of success. "Black Box Intelligence is the gold standard of the industry," he shared.

THEIR STORY:

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CHALLENGES:

- Understanding how Willie's restaurant compares to the competition
- Managing multiple areas of the business while keeping a balance of the teams' digital activities
- Not having the right tools for sales and traffic data

SOLUTIONS:

- Guest Intelligence
- Workforce Intelligence
- Financial Intelligence

RESULTS:

- With BBI, Willie's can set attainable benchmark goals that the team is able to monitor progress
- BBI's insights are shared with every department and member on their team
- BBI has allowed Willie's to better track customer experience
- Streamlined data has allowed Willie's to better monitor the overall health of the brand
- With more cohesive data, they've become more proactive in their approach to address the health of their employees and business

Building the Secure, Strategic Way to Scale

Willie's set out to find efficiencies throughout its operations as the team prepped for new store growth and LTOs. In order to achieve this, they needed to know where to focus their time and Marketing budget.

Without a proper solution, the process for executing this effort would be extremely manual. To do it well would require someone to consistently research and report on market performance, how changes within the brand were resonating with customers, and whether or not Willie's was providing a competitive work environment for its employees. That work would require a full headcount with someone solely responsible for executing, which is unrealistic to ask of any restaurant brand.

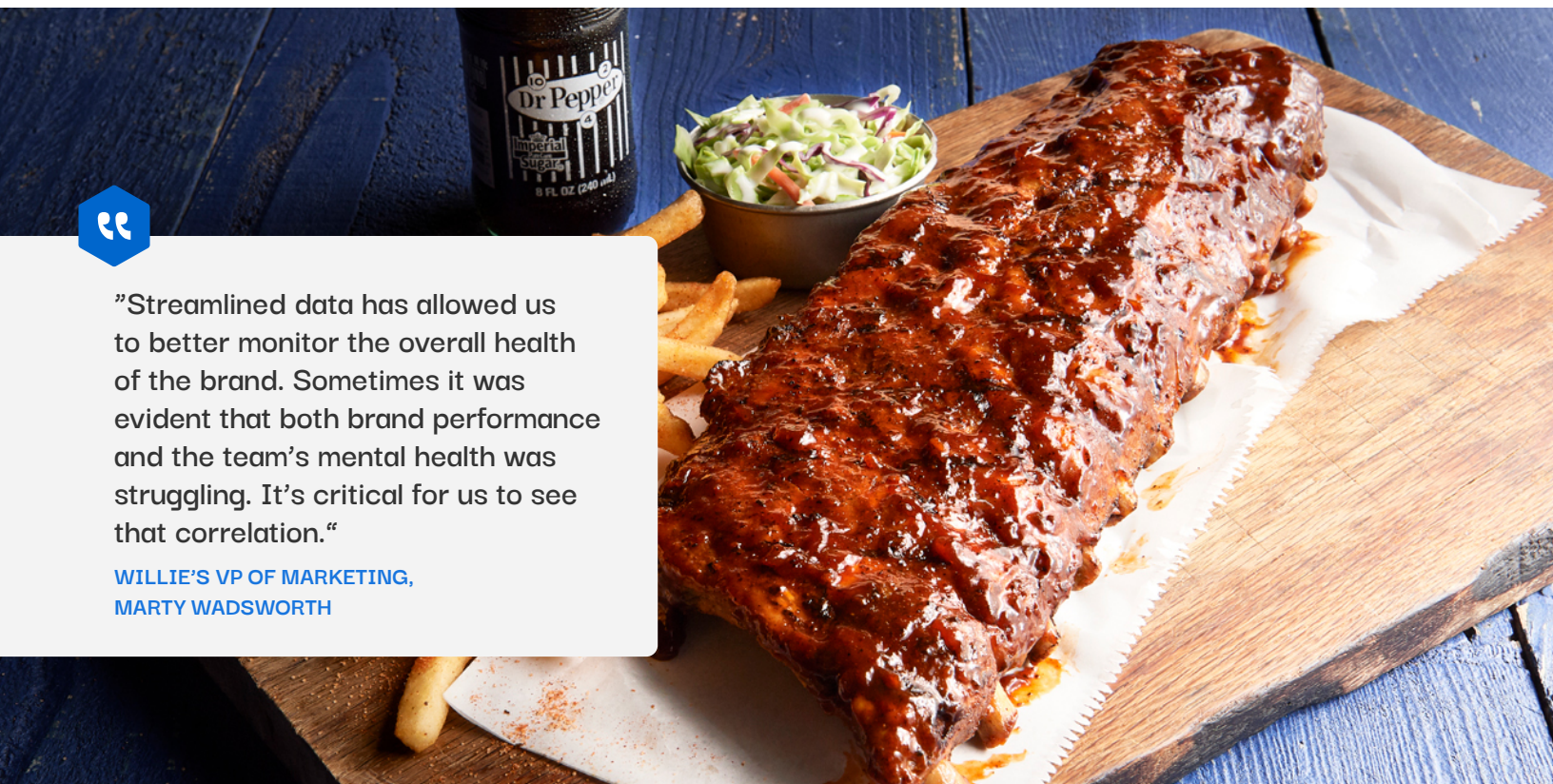
Because of Black Box Intelligence's proven ability to capture the industry's most comprehensive performance data, Marty trusted Black Box to guide the decision-making at Willie's. The team rolled out Financial Intelligence to monitor restaurant sales and traffic, and later added Guest Intelligence and Workforce Intelligence to gain a 360-view of industry health and trends.

Data for Multiple Departments in the Organization

After implementing Black Box's Financial, Guest, and Workforce Intelligence, team members from every department and seniority level were able to benefit from the data. As a best practice, Willie's shares BBI's insights with every single team member: from hourly front-of-house staff members to back-of-house kitchen staff members, and, of course, managing partners and GMs.

Front-line team members use the data to examine their 'intent to return' scores so they can continually monitor the trends that are driving those scores. "They're also tapped into in-store sales. Not only last year's, but three years prior. They can ensure Willie's is making traction with guests, which is ultimately what it comes down to. Not dollars and cents but true sentiment from the guests," Marty reported.

For the Finance, Operations, and HR team, they review specific categories in the data to assess the performance in their given field. With Black Box's additional layer of benchmarking against the rest of the industry, each team can quickly identify what critical items they need to address. More importantly, the benchmarking data



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removes the guesswork and concern over how well Willie's is performing. "You think, 'I'm probably in the bottom quartile' when really, you're in the top 5% of that category. It also makes you feel more connected to other brands who might be experiencing similar challenges."

At the executive level, Marty and team have a bird's eye view of how an individual store or the entire brand is performing. "To have national information is good but knowing more about the competition directly next door is priceless."

By using BBI's data, Marty's Marketing team can level set against their competitors in the Texas market, where the brand is headquartered. More specifically, the team monitors how industry peers are doing comparably in sales, customer segment, sentiment, and more.

Every department at Willie's leverages BBI – finance, ops, and even HR review the reports daily as a resource to fuel strategic planning.

Bringing Clarity to Restaurant Operations and Performance

Benchmarking can be a blind spot for many businesses. Some just don't have the information or means to get it, which leads many marketers to benchmark below believability. "To combat this, we set attainable goals that the team is able to achieve".

For instance, before BBI the Willie's team was putting too much energy and focus on digital activities, while other areas of the business required more attention. "We had team members investing time, effort, and energy into monitoring digital stats. The information would be piecemealed together after hours spent digging in one online channel after another. Our sales and traffic data was compiled with a pencil and a calculator".

By removing the manual administrative work, Willie's was able to reshape their workforce, investments and resources. These improvements helped Willie's gain the output and benefit of having an additional headcount without the additional labor hours.





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“Streamlined data has allowed us to better monitor the overall health of the brand,” Marty reported. “Sometimes it was evident that both brand performance and the team’s mental health was struggling. It’s critical for us to see that correlation. With BBI’s comprehensive data, the team is able to be more proactive and see the positive impact they’re making on the business. Black Box’s solutions improved the way we execute 100%.”

Operating Through Covid

Staying on the pulse of brand health is one thing—but staying on top of consumer and industry trends is another. During the Covid pandemic, safety and cleanliness were a massive priority. Willie’s made the conscious decision to be best in class in this category and actually lead the pack when it came to guests comfortably visiting a restaurant. “We also wanted guests to feel comfortable sitting at a table and being served by a server,” Marty added. There was a lot of doubt when restaurants first re-opened, so Willie’s became laser focused on achieving this. As a result, they saw the needle progressively tick up.

That was the biggest win over Covid. Service was another one. “We strive to be best in class with our service scores and a customer’s intent to return, and monitor our progress through BBI’s Guest, Financial, and Workforce Intelligence.

Since doing so, we’ve never had a higher ‘intent to return’ score in the brand’s history!” Marty exclaimed. This is a true indicator of alignment through all levels of the organization.

Getting Ahead of the Curve

Now, the data shows that convenience has slowly started to surpass service, and the Willie’s team is fully prepared to meet those customer expectations.

Marty emphasized that “a guest is willing to pay a little bit more if they don’t have to leave their door. And they’re absolutely willing to sacrifice a little bit of quality if they can once again get that convenience. They simply want the convenience of having their meal delivered in a timely manner.” The Marketing and Operations team now have direction on where to focus their efforts.

Moving forward, one of Willie’s major focuses is to switch the brand’s focus from beer to cocktails. Despite the fact that Texans typically associate an “ice house” with beer, beer makes up less than 2 percent of Willie’s overall sales. As they shift and expand, cocktails will be more of a focus. In an effort to de-risk the new initiative, Marty conveyed that “it’s an opportunity to leverage BBI and its industry data in this next chapter.”

As Willie’s navigates new territory and enters into a new segment, which is more of a bar and grill split, Marty and team will use BBI data to prove out the new concept quickly. The brand will also retrofit five existing locations with bars to expand on this theme. “Without the granularity and accuracy of the data, we’d be making uninformed decisions, essentially throwing darts against a board. With Black Box Intelligence, we’re expanding the board five times and still throwing that same dart with a much larger target.”



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