

Blaze Pizza Names New CMO and Chief Restaurant Officer

Fast-casual brand appoints Vince Szwajkowski to head marketing and Rick Gestring to oversee corporate, franchise operations

By Ron Ruggles | October 8, 2020

Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza has expanded its executive ranks with the appointment of Vince Szwajkowski as chief marketing officer and Rick Gestring as chief restaurant officer, the company announced Thursday.

The Pasadena, Calif.-based fast-casual pizza brand earlier this year added Marie Zhang as chief supply chain officer and Ed Yancey as vice president of franchise development on its corporate team.

Szwajkowski succeeds Shivram Vaideeswaran as CMO, and Gestring succeeds Jim Bitticks as chief restaurant officer, a spokesperson said.

"I am absolutely thrilled to be adding world-class marketing and operations leaders to the Blaze executive team," said Mandy Shaw, CEO of Blaze Pizza. in a statement. "Both Vince and Rick have extensive experience in building culturally relevant brands and evolving the guest journey. I'm confident that they will be pivotal in taking us into the next stages of growth."



As chief marketing officer, Szwajkowski, left, is responsible for the development, planning and execution of all digital, marketing and brand strategy.

Prior to Blaze, Szwajkowski worked with ArcLight Cinemas and Hilton. At Hilton, he helped create and lead the global hospitality brand Motto by Hilton, a new category of lifestyle hotels.

"Blaze has built its reputation on disrupting the pizza space through its unique customer-centric concept and devoted following," Szwajkowski said.



As chief restaurant officer, Gestring, left, oversees restaurant operations and innovation, across both corporate and franchise units.

Before Blaze Pizza, Gestring was at Dunkin' Brands, leading aspects of operation systems and guest experience in more than 8,500 locations. He also worked with Arby's.

"Culture is so important to me; and at Blaze, culture and purpose is at the core of everything we do," Gestring said. "I'm inspired by the people behind the pizza, and the journey we are embarking on together with our guests and franchisees."

Blaze Pizza, backed by private-equity firm Brentwood Associates, ended fiscal 2019 with nearly 320 U.S. units, according to [the Nation's Restaurant News Top 200](#).

The Top 200 survey reported Blaze Pizza with \$367 million in U.S. systemwide sales for the year ended December 2019, up from \$326.6 million in the preceding year.