RBI CEO highlights focus on purpose before profits

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Jose Cil (A&S ’91), CEO of Restaurant Brands International, discussed the company’s focus on purpose before profits as luncheon keynote speaker at the 43rd annual Tulane Business Forum. The event, an annual presentation of the Tulane Association of Business Alumni (TABA), took place on Friday, Oct. 14, at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

Most people probably don’t think of fast-food restaurants as a purpose-driven business, but the chief executive of Burger King, Popeyes, Tim Horton’s and Firehouse Subs is out to change that.

“Profits are an output of doing the right thing day in and day out, for the people, for your franchisees, for the communities in which you operate and for the planet,” said

Jose Cil (A&S ’91), CEO of Canadian-American holding company Restaurant Brands International Inc. “My focus has really been about creating an organization that is loved by its employees, by its franchisees and by its customers, and doing that by focusing on purpose before profits.”

Cil was the luncheon keynote speaker at the 43rd Tulane Business Forum, which took place on Friday, Oct. 14, at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans. An annual presentation of the Tulane Association of Business Alumni (TABA), the forum brings together national and international business leaders to discuss their industries, companies and careers.

As CEO of Restaurant Brands International, Cil oversees some of the most iconic brands in the industry, including New Orleans favorite Popeyes, which the company acquired in 2017 for an eyebrow-raising $1.8 billion, nearly 18 times EBITA.

“Today, it’s considered one of the best deals in the history of the restaurant space,” Cil said. “We’ve grown the top line in just five-and-a-half years by 60% and the bottom line by more than three times, and I believe that we’re just getting started with this really incredible brand.”

Cil became CEO in 2019 after serving in a variety of leadership roles with Burger King, and he immediately ruffled some feathers with an unconventional new mission that elevated values over financial goals.

“We refer to our mission as our big dream — to build the most loved restaurants brands in the world,” Cil said. “Some of the finance guys were like, ‘What does that mean? How much exactly do we need to grow?’”

Cil defended the unabashedly aspirational nature of the mission.

“Having a big dream — having something that is really hard to get to and that everyone collectively and collaboratively work toward — is one of the key elements of our culture,” he said. “People want to be part of something that has purpose, that drives you and motivates you.”

Cil cited five pillars that support the dream, including being brand led rather than corporate led, focusing on exceptional guest experiences, driving digital innovation and modeling excellence as a franchisor.

“The fifth one — which I think is the most important one — is living a culture that attracts and retains the best talent in the world,” Cil said. “It all starts with our people. We want to make sure that we’re hiring the best talent available constantly.”

RBI’s leadership development program recruits candidates from some the best universities in the country, including Tulane, which has sent 15 graduates to the company in recent years.

More than classroom experience and academic achievement, Cil said RBI is looking for candidates with the right mindset — being curious and open-minded, thinking like an owner, embracing accountability, and displaying creativity and innovation.

“The only place in our company that I don't encourage creativity and innovation is in accounting,” he added. “We want them to kind of stay straight and narrow.”

In addition to Cil, this year’s forum included presentations from a wide variety of business leaders, including Greg Feirn, CEO of Louisiana Children’s Medical Center, who joined Tulane President Mike Fitts for a special session highlighting the recently announced partnership between Tulane and LCMC.

Other speakers included Paulo Goes, dean of the Freeman School; Gregory M. Bowser, president and CEO of the Louisiana Chemical Association and Louisiana Chemical Industry Alliance; Randy Giveans, executive vice president of Navigator Gas US; Kim Boyle, partner at Phelps Dunbar; Kimberly Gramm, chief innovation & entrepreneurship officer of the Tulane Innovation Institute; Ray Jeandron, partner with LongueVue Capital; Kristy Nichols, system vice president of partnerships and integration, and Laura Wilt, system vice president and CIO, at Ochsner Health; Louis David, vice president of industry attraction and retention for the New Orleans Business Alliance; Mali Carow, general manager of the Four Seasons Hotel and Private Residences New Orleans; Stan Harris, president and CEO of the Louisiana Restaurant Association; and Emily Madero, president and CEO of French Quarter Festivals Inc.