Innocean Wins El Pollo Loco Creative Account From Organic

After a competitive review, El Pollo Loco has dropped incumbent agency Organic and handed its creative business to Innocean USA, charging the Southern California shop with reviving the 50-year-old QSR for the next generation of diners.

The move comes amid El Pollo Loco's broader effort to reintroduce itself to a younger, more culturally attuned audience while retaining its legacy fanbase. The three-month pitch process resulted in a rare outcome: Innocean's winning idea didn't just secure the business—it's shaping the entire brand relaunch, which will go live nationally on May 15.

"We're in year two of a three-year brand turnaround," Jill Adams, El Pollo Loco's CMO, told ADWEEK. "The business is incredibly healthy—our food is incredible—but really it's more around how we show up for the next 50 years, and how we appeal to the next generation of El Pollo Loco customers."

Adams described the upcoming campaign as an "evolution, not a revolution." While the brand will retain its logo and color palette, the refresh will focus more heavily on quality and freshness, highlighting both the food and the moments in which it's enjoyed. The creative campaign, meanwhile, will run across traditional, digital, and social channels. A sneak peek is expected during the brand's May 1 earnings call.

To guide the pitch, El Pollo Loco partnered with consultancy The Burnett Collective. From an initial wide field, the brand

narrowed candidates down based on several “non-negotiables,” including regional presence and QSR experience. After chemistry meetings, the team selected three finalists.

Innocean, a late addition to the field, edged out competitors by frequently communicating throughout the process to evolve its pitch into a fully realized brand platform.

“We were giving the time and the space for a lot of feedback through the process,” Adams said. “That ultimately allowed Innocean to land on an idea that informed the brand relaunch.”

The winning pitch also centered on the insight that El Pollo Loco’s customer is a “fast foodie”—a person who balances a love for social engagement with moments of personal reflection and care. “That insight really helped us drive how we think about the brand refresh, how El Pollo Loco can be a part of that journey just by knowing this duality of our customer,” Adams added.

Innocean chief creative officer Jason Sperling said the win marks a new chapter for the agency as well. “I don’t know if we are showing up on people’s radar yet, but we’re definitely changing that,” Sperling told ADWEEK. “One of the best compliments we received (besides winning the pitch) was being told by the consultants and clients is that this wasn’t the Innocean they knew. That means a lot given the evolution we’ve gone through and talent we’ve brought in.”

Sperling added that while Innocean was a late addition to the pitch process, the agency made the most of its window to impress. “We dove in, took full advantage of our check-ins with clients, really listened to the feedback, and ultimately brought forward a mix of breakthrough work and strategic thinking that we felt would help them reach the next level and broaden their customer base,” he said. “This brand deserves to be iconic and have a huge fan base like some competitors, and I think this work will deliver it.”

Organic served first as El Pollo Loco's social and digital AOR before expanding into creative in 2023. Adams praised the incumbent, saying, "They were a wonderful partner, and we did a lot of incredible work together. Ultimately, we just felt it was the time to move on to a different agency as we go into our next 50 years."

Part of that next chapter includes reconnecting with the brand's origin story—a tale that begins not in a kitchen, but a shoe store. The founder, frustrated by a local chicken restaurant's inconsistent hours, closed his shoe business and opened a restaurant using his mother's marinade in Guasave, Sinaloa, Mexico in 1975.

"When you think about that, it shouldn't have worked," said Adams. "But he had this unwavering passion—'I'm going to bring this chicken to the world.' That's the passion we're returning to."

Today, El Pollo Loco has more than 500 locations across California, Nevada, Texas, Arizona, Utah, Louisiana, and Colorado. Nearly 80% are based in California.

El Pollo Loco declined to disclose how much it is investing in the rebrand or its current media spend. The company reported $473 million in revenue for fiscal year 2024, a slight increase over the previous year, according to its most recent earnings report.

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