

Positioning Strategy of Olive Garden Restaurant Chain

Posted on July 31, 2022

Introduction

Market positioning refers to the way a company designs its products, services, image, and marketing activities so that it occupies a clear and desirable place in the minds of its target customers. Effective positioning helps consumers understand what a brand offers, how it differs from competitors, and why they should choose it. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), positioning involves creating a distinct offering and image that will occupy a meaningful place in the target market's mind.

The restaurant industry depends heavily on positioning because customers have many dining options. They can choose among fast-food restaurants, casual dining chains, independent restaurants, cafés, steakhouses, takeout services, delivery platforms, and premium dining establishments. A restaurant must therefore communicate more than the type of food it serves. It must also establish the experience, value, atmosphere, convenience, and emotional benefits customers can expect.

Olive Garden and Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse both use themed dining experiences to attract customers. Olive Garden is positioned as an accessible, family-friendly Italian-American restaurant offering generous portions, familiar food, and consistent service. Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse is positioned more narrowly as an experience-oriented Japanese restaurant where customers can enjoy hibachi cooking, sushi, seafood, and live preparation.

Although both businesses compete within the full-service restaurant market, their positioning strategies differ significantly. Olive Garden follows a broad-market strategy supported by national scale, standardized operations, affordable pricing, and extensive off-premise services. Miyabi follows a more focused strategy built around Japanese-inspired cuisine, chef entertainment, restaurant atmosphere, and special-occasion dining.

This paper describes Olive Garden and Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse, evaluates their positioning strategies, compares their value propositions, and explains how each brand attempts to establish a distinctive place in the minds of consumers.

Description of Olive Garden

Olive Garden is an American full-service restaurant chain and a major brand of Darden Restaurants, Inc., which is headquartered in Orlando, Florida. The first Olive Garden restaurant opened in Orlando

in 1982. The brand was originally developed within the restaurant business associated with General Mills before Darden became a separate publicly traded company in 1995.

Since its first opening, Olive Garden has grown rapidly and become one of the most recognizable Italian-themed restaurant chains in the United States. Darden describes Olive Garden as the largest full-service Italian dining operator in the country. As of May 31, 2026, Darden operated 949 company-owned Olive Garden restaurants, in addition to restaurants operated through franchise and international arrangements. In fiscal 2026, Olive Garden generated approximately \$5.59 billion in annual sales, accounting for about 42% of Darden's total sales of \$13.21 billion (Darden Restaurants, Inc., 2026).

These figures demonstrate the importance of Olive Garden to its parent company. Although the original observation that Olive Garden accounts for almost half of Darden's revenue is broadly understandable, a more precise statement is that the chain generated slightly more than two-fifths of Darden's fiscal 2026 sales.

Olive Garden offers Italian-American dishes such as pasta, chicken, seafood, soups, salads, appetizers, desserts, and wine. The restaurant is especially associated with unlimited breadsticks and the option of unlimited soup or salad with many meals. These products have become important parts of the brand's identity because they communicate abundance and value.

The company does not position itself as a formal or strictly traditional Italian restaurant. Instead, it offers familiar Italian-inspired food in a casual and family-oriented setting. Its official brand message emphasizes that "Italian generosity" is always available at the table. Olive Garden connects its meals with togetherness, comfort, sharing, and family occasions rather than culinary exclusivity alone (Olive Garden, n.d.).

Description of Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse

The word *miyabi* is commonly associated with elegance, refinement, or courtliness. This meaning fits the restaurant's emphasis on aesthetics, presentation, and an enjoyable dining environment.

The history connected to the Miyabi restaurant family began in 1979 in Charleston, South Carolina, with the establishment of Kyoto Japanese Steakhouse. The business provided hibachi-style cooking and a full-service sushi bar. As the restaurant operation expanded in the southeastern United States, related concepts were developed, including Miyabi Japanese Steak & Seafood and Miyabi Jr. Express (Miyabi Jr. Express, n.d.).

The full-service Miyabi Japanese Steak & Seafood website currently identifies locations in Myrtle Beach and Murrells Inlet, South Carolina. It describes the experience as a place for dinner with family and friends and promotes chefs preparing meals hibachi-style, sushi, an attractive fountain, and a stylish waiting area. The brand therefore gives considerable attention to the visual environment and

entertainment associated with the meal, not merely the food placed on the table (Miyabi Japanese Steak & Seafood, n.d.).

Customers can enjoy Japanese steakhouse dishes, seafood, sushi, rice, vegetables, and other hibachi-style items. One of the restaurant's most distinctive elements is that customers can watch a chef prepare food on a heated cooking surface in front of them. The cooking process may include skilled knife work, conversation, coordinated movements, and entertaining presentation.

Miyabi does not possess Olive Garden's national market share or restaurant network. Its full-service operations are more regionally concentrated. The original statement that all locations are completely company-owned should be treated cautiously because detailed public ownership information is limited, and the related Miyabi Jr. Express concept now advertises franchise opportunities. It is therefore more accurate to describe Miyabi as a regional restaurant business rather than make a general claim that every location follows one ownership model.

Miyabi's smaller scale does not necessarily represent a disadvantage in every respect. A regional restaurant can build a stronger local identity, offer a more specialized experience, and develop close relationships with repeat customers. Miyabi's official website even presents the restaurant as a family vacation tradition for visitors who return regularly to the area.

Understanding Restaurant Positioning

A restaurant's positioning strategy normally answers four major questions:

1. Who is the target customer?
2. What category does the restaurant compete in?
3. What unique value does it provide?
4. What evidence supports its promise?

Olive Garden and Miyabi both compete in casual or full-service dining, but they answer these questions differently.

Olive Garden targets a broad range of consumers, including families, couples, groups, travelers, and customers seeking a familiar sit-down meal at a manageable price. Its primary points of difference are generous portions, unlimited breadsticks and soup or salad, widespread availability, consistent menu items, and family-oriented Italian-American hospitality.

Miyabi targets customers who want both a meal and an entertaining Japanese steakhouse experience. Its points of difference include tableside hibachi preparation, direct interaction with chefs, sushi, seafood, Japanese-inspired décor, and a social atmosphere appropriate for celebrations or group dining.

Positioning is successful when customers can describe a brand in a few clear ideas. Olive Garden

seeks to be remembered for generous, affordable, family-style Italian dining. Miyabi seeks to be remembered for entertaining hibachi preparation and a distinctive Japanese steakhouse atmosphere.

Positioning Strategy of Olive Garden

Olive Garden's positioning strategy is based on delivering convenient, familiar, and good-quality food at an affordable full-service dining price. The company attempts to make customers feel that they receive both a meal and a generous experience.

The original discussion referred to Gene Lee as the chief executive officer of Darden. Lee previously led the company, but Darden's current president and chief executive officer is Rick Cardenas. In announcing fiscal 2026 results, Cardenas connected Darden's performance to the strength of its brands, disciplined strategy, and restaurant teams (Darden Restaurants, Inc., 2026).

Olive Garden's positioning can be examined through several important elements.

Strong Value Proposition

Olive Garden's value proposition combines quantity, familiarity, service, and price. A customer who orders an entrée may also receive unlimited breadsticks and a choice of soup or salad. This arrangement makes the meal appear more generous than an entrée sold by itself.

During fiscal 2025, Olive Garden's average customer check was approximately \$24. Most dinner entrées were priced between \$12 and \$23.50, while most lunch entrées ranged from \$9.50 to \$11.50. These prices placed the restaurant above fast food but below many premium or fine-dining businesses (Darden Restaurants, Inc., 2025).

The value proposition is not based only on low prices. Olive Garden attempts to offer an experience that feels generous relative to the amount paid. Breadsticks, soup, salad, large pasta dishes, and shareable appetizers reinforce the perception that customers receive substantial value.

Family-Oriented Experience

Olive Garden strongly associates its brand with families, friendship, and togetherness. The restaurant's atmosphere is intended to be warm and accessible rather than highly formal. Customers can bring children, organize group meals, celebrate birthdays, or meet relatives without facing the expectations associated with fine dining.

The emotional value of this positioning is important. Consumers do not always choose a restaurant only because one dish tastes better than another. They may select a restaurant because it feels safe, familiar, comfortable, and suitable for everyone in the group.

Olive Garden's broad menu supports this positioning. Pasta, chicken, seafood, soups, salads, and children's meals allow groups with different preferences to dine together. Darden also adapts menus in some geographic markets to reflect differences in customer preferences and pricing.

Customer Service

Customer service is another important part of Olive Garden's value proposition. A full-service restaurant cannot rely on food alone. Greeting, seating, order accuracy, speed, attentiveness, cleanliness, and problem resolution all influence the customer's perception of the brand.

Olive Garden attempts to provide a predictable service experience across hundreds of locations. Standardized training and operating procedures help the chain deliver similar service in different cities. This consistency reduces the customer's perceived risk. A traveler who has never visited a particular Olive Garden may still have a reasonable idea of what to expect.

However, standardization must not make the experience feel mechanical. Employees must still respond to individual customer needs. The strongest service positioning combines consistency with genuine hospitality.

Off-Premise Convenience

Olive Garden's positioning strategy also includes off-premise dining. Customers can order food for pickup, catering, and, in participating markets, delivery. These services enable the company to compete when customers want restaurant food without eating inside the restaurant.

Off-premise service became especially important as consumer expectations shifted toward digital ordering and convenience. Olive Garden's website includes ordering, catering, restaurant-location, and wait-list functions. These features reduce the effort required to access the brand.

Convenience extends the restaurant's positioning beyond special family dinners. Olive Garden can also provide meals for offices, celebrations, home gatherings, or customers who want pasta and other menu items delivered or collected.

Menu Innovation

Menu innovation helps Olive Garden remain relevant while preserving familiar products. The company cannot remove every traditional menu item in pursuit of novelty because many customers return specifically for recognizable dishes. At the same time, a completely unchanged menu may appear outdated.

The restaurant therefore balances core products with seasonal promotions, limited-time offers, lunch

selections, children's meals, beverages, and value-oriented combinations. Offers such as "Buy One, Take One" strengthen the brand's generosity positioning because the customer receives one meal for the restaurant and another to take home.

Innovation at Olive Garden is normally evolutionary rather than radical. New products must still fit the brand's Italian-American identity and operational model.

Upgraded Facilities

Restaurant facilities contribute to positioning because customers judge a business through its parking, entrance, waiting area, furniture, lighting, restrooms, dining room, and exterior appearance.

Olive Garden has invested in new restaurants and upgrades to existing locations. A well-maintained facility supports the promise of a comfortable and reliable family experience. A poorly maintained restaurant would weaken the brand even if the food remained unchanged.

Operational Improvements

Operational improvement involves reducing waiting times, maintaining food quality, controlling costs, scheduling employees effectively, improving order accuracy, and ensuring that dining rooms and kitchens operate smoothly.

Olive Garden's scale gives it advantages in purchasing, technology, advertising, training, and menu development. However, scale also creates a challenge because a service failure at one location may damage the reputation of the whole chain.

The company's positioning therefore depends on consistent execution. Advertising may attract a customer once, but operational quality determines whether the customer returns.

Positioning Strategy of Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse

Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse is best known for the quality of its food, entertaining preparation, and distinctive dining environment. Its positioning strategy relies less on national scale and more on the uniqueness of the restaurant experience.

Authenticity and Japanese-Inspired Cuisine

Miyabi positions its menu around Japanese steakhouse and seafood dishes. The selection includes hibachi-prepared steak, chicken, shrimp, seafood, vegetables, rice, noodles, sushi, and related items.

The original discussion emphasized crab, sushi, lobster, scallops, steaks, wine, and other beverages. These menu categories support the perception that Miyabi provides a broader and more premium experience than a typical quick-service restaurant.

The concept is Japanese-themed, not Chinese-themed. The original comparison incorrectly described Miyabi's products as Chinese. Its cuisine, hibachi presentation, sushi, name, and décor are all associated with Japanese restaurant traditions.

Experiential Dining

The strongest part of Miyabi's positioning is the ability of customers to see their food being prepared. The chef becomes both a food professional and a performer. The sounds, movements, steam, aromas, conversation, and presentation make the preparation process part of the product.

This creates experiential value. A customer does not pay only for steak, seafood, rice, or vegetables. The customer also pays for entertainment, social interaction, and a memorable event.

The experience is particularly suitable for birthdays, family outings, vacation meals, group celebrations, and customers bringing children. The shared table can also make dining more social because customers watch the same performance.

Miyabi's official positioning reflects this combination by promoting both good food and entertainment.

Physical Environment

Miyabi uses its physical environment as part of its competitive strategy. Japanese-inspired décor, fountains, waiting areas, cooking stations, lighting, and furnishings help separate the restaurant from an ordinary steakhouse.

The official website specifically calls attention to its fountain, waiting area, and ceiling. These physical features show that Miyabi wants customers to notice the surroundings before the meal begins.

This strategy is important because services are intangible. Customers cannot evaluate a dining experience fully before purchasing it. The appearance of the restaurant provides evidence about the expected quality of the service.

Product Quality

Miyabi's positioning also depends on the perceived freshness and quality of its ingredients. Customers can observe much of the cooking process, making preparation quality visible. This transparency can increase trust because diners see the chef handling and cooking the food.

Steak, seafood, sushi, and specialty beverages can also support a more premium position. Compared with Olive Garden's broad affordability strategy, Miyabi may be perceived as a restaurant customers visit less frequently but choose for a more distinctive occasion.

Regional and Relationship-Based Positioning

Miyabi does not possess Olive Garden's national advertising power or widespread network. It can, however, use regional identity and customer relationships as advantages.

The official website presents the restaurant as a repeated family-vacation tradition. This suggests that customers may connect Miyabi with memories of visiting the South Carolina coast. Such emotional associations can create loyalty that is difficult for a standardized national competitor to reproduce.

Comparison of the Positioning Strategies

Both Olive Garden and Miyabi offer themed products and environments, but they emphasize different customer benefits.

Positioning element	Olive Garden	Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse
Cuisine	Italian-American	Japanese steakhouse, hibachi, sushi, and seafood
Target market	Broad family and casual-dining market	Families, groups, tourists, celebrations, and experience-seeking diners
Core value proposition	Generous, familiar Italian dining at an accessible price	Entertaining tableside cooking and distinctive Japanese-inspired dining
Main differentiation	Unlimited breadsticks, soup or salad, consistency, scale, and convenience	Chef performance, hibachi preparation, sushi, atmosphere, and social experience

Positioning element	Olive Garden	Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse
Geographic reach	National and international presence	Primarily regional full-service presence
Price position	Affordable to moderate full-service dining	Moderate to premium, depending on menu selections
Service experience	Standardized family hospitality	Interactive and entertainment-oriented service
Off-premise strength	Strong pickup, catering, digital ordering, and delivery capabilities	Primarily centered on the in-restaurant experience
Brand personality	Warm, generous, familiar, and family-oriented	Elegant, exciting, theatrical, and occasion-oriented
Competitive strategy	Broad differentiation with value	Focused differentiation through experience

Olive Garden competes by appealing to a large audience. Its customers may include people seeking lunch, a family dinner, takeout, catering, or a predictable meal while traveling. Its scale enables strong advertising, purchasing power, consistent menus, and technology investment.

Miyabi competes through specialization. It is less convenient for a quick or routine meal because the hibachi experience may require more time. However, this longer experience becomes an advantage when customers want entertainment and social interaction.

Olive Garden's experience is centered on abundance and togetherness. Miyabi's experience is centered on performance and participation. Both brands use food to create emotional value, but the emotions are different. Olive Garden promotes comfort and familiarity, while Miyabi promotes excitement and memorability.

Evaluation of Olive Garden's Position

Olive Garden's positioning is strong because it is clear and consistent. Customers generally know that the restaurant offers casual Italian-American food, unlimited breadsticks, soup or salad, large portions, and family-oriented service.

Its large restaurant network also strengthens accessibility. A position cannot generate sales when customers cannot access the product. Olive Garden's locations, digital ordering, catering, and off-premise options make the brand available across different dining situations.

The company's fiscal performance indicates that the position remains commercially effective. Olive Garden's annual sales increased from approximately \$5.21 billion in fiscal 2025 to \$5.59 billion in fiscal 2026, while annual same-restaurant sales increased by 4% during fiscal 2026 (Darden Restaurants, Inc., 2026).

However, Olive Garden also faces risks. Its familiar menu may be viewed as less authentic by customers seeking traditional regional Italian cuisine. Rising prices may weaken its affordability position. It must also compete against independent Italian restaurants, pizza chains, fast-casual concepts, meal delivery services, and grocery-store prepared foods.

The company must therefore protect the balance among price, quality, quantity, and service. If prices rise without visible improvements in the experience, customers may feel that the brand no longer provides the same value.

Evaluation of Miyabi's Position

Miyabi's positioning is also distinctive. Hibachi preparation is difficult to imitate without specialized cooking stations, trained chefs, appropriate facilities, and an entertainment-oriented service model.

The restaurant's physical environment and live cooking help produce memorable customer experiences. This is particularly valuable in tourism-oriented markets such as Myrtle Beach and Murrells Inlet, where customers may be looking for more than an ordinary meal.

However, Miyabi's positioning also creates limitations. The concept depends heavily on the chef's skill and personality. An unengaging performance, long wait, inconsistent food quality, or poorly maintained dining room could significantly reduce customer satisfaction.

The full-service experience is also less suited to customers seeking very fast meals. The related Miyabi Jr. Express concept responds to this problem by offering Japanese flavors in a quicker format, but the express format has a different position from the full-service steakhouse.

Strategic Recommendations

Olive Garden should continue protecting its central position of accessible Italian generosity. It should maintain its iconic breadsticks, soup, salad, and familiar pasta selections while introducing carefully chosen menu innovations. It should also continue improving digital ordering, catering, pickup, delivery, and restaurant facilities without allowing convenience to weaken the in-person experience.

Miyabi should continue emphasizing chef entertainment, freshness, sushi, seafood, and Japanese-inspired atmosphere. It can strengthen its position by presenting clearer menu information online, improving reservation systems, maintaining consistent chef training, and encouraging customers to share celebration and vacation experiences through digital media.

Miyabi should not attempt to compete directly with Olive Garden on national scale. Its strongest opportunity is focused differentiation. It can serve customers who want an interactive dining event rather than a standardized meal.

Both restaurants should ensure that their marketing promises match the actual customer experience. Positioning cannot be sustained by advertising alone. Food quality, cleanliness, waiting time, employee behavior, order accuracy, and atmosphere must reinforce the brand message during every visit.

Conclusion

Olive Garden is a major American restaurant chain and the largest full-service Italian dining operator in the United States. Its positioning strategy combines affordable prices, generous portions, familiar Italian-American food, family-oriented hospitality, off-premise convenience, menu innovation, upgraded facilities, and operational consistency.

Miyabi Japanese Steakhouse follows a different strategy. It is positioned around Japanese-inspired cuisine, hibachi-style cooking, sushi, seafood, chef entertainment, and a visually distinctive restaurant environment. Customers can watch their meals being prepared, making the cooking process an important part of the product.

When comparing the positioning strategies, both restaurants offer themed dining experiences, but they do not market the same benefit. Olive Garden markets familiarity, accessibility, value, and generosity to a broad audience. Miyabi markets interactive entertainment, atmosphere, and specialized Japanese steakhouse dining to a more focused market.

The original comparison described Olive Garden as Italian-themed and Miyabi as Chinese-themed. This should be corrected because Miyabi is Japanese-themed. The two brands should therefore be compared as Italian-American and Japanese restaurant concepts.

Olive Garden has the stronger market share, wider geographic reach, greater brand recognition, and more developed off-premise capabilities. Miyabi has a more specialized and theatrical dining experience that can produce strong emotional memories and regional customer loyalty.

Ultimately, both positioning strategies can be successful because they respond to different customer expectations. Olive Garden answers the need for a reliable and generous family meal, while Miyabi answers the desire for food, entertainment, and social interaction in one restaurant experience.

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