

10 marketing tips for restaurants

Advice on how to boost sales and stand out from the crowd

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Linda Duke is chief executive of Duke Marketing and author of "Recipes for Restaurateurs." Duke has led her San Rafael, Calif.-based firm, which specializes in multiunit and franchised restaurant concepts, for more than two decades. She has advised brands from Rubio's to Togo's Sandwiches on public relations, local store marketing, and investor relations and crisis communications. In the following column, she offers 10 marketing tips for restaurant operators.

Surprise me

In order to open their wallets and pocketbooks, today's timid consumers want something special. We're not talking about a surprising discount, but a surprising call to action. If recession-weary consumers are going to let the moths out of their coin purses, it had better be good. Creativity is the key.

Pay attention to growing Hispanic influence

The Hispanic influence in the United States is growing. The future of our nation and the restaurant industry depends on what happens to this population. How your brand markets itself effectively to this group of increasingly influential customers is key in the years to come.

In pursuit of the social customer

While who owns social media may be the wrong question to ask, social media for the time being appears to live in one primary department. Over time, however, social media will extend the capacity of any business affected by outside behavior.

In a recent marketers' survey, which asked which departments are involved in social media, 90 percent of participants pointed to marketing. Public relations followed with 64 percent. Sales showed a strong presence with 46 percent, and customer service also made the list with a solid 39 percent. I found it interesting that investor relations made an official appearance on the list. Even with 8 percent, it's a telling sign of things to come.

In 2011, 75 percent of marketers plan to increase their use of social media, and 19 percent will remain at current levels. In the mobile arena, 62 percent of respondents will use more apps for the iPhone and Droid, while 21 percent of marketers will develop apps at current levels. Sixty-one percent of marketers will increase their use of microblogging sites like Twitter and Yammer, and 27 percent will stay the course.

In addition, 55 percent of marketers will increase video production and distribution with YouTube, Vimeo and other sites, while 31 percent will continue as is. Brands will increase their focus on top-tier blogs to reach customers and peers by 52 percent, with 35 percent staying constant.

2011 is a pivotal year for social media. While many brands believe in its importance, there is still a great deal to learn. What's clear, however, is just how early brands are in this growth curve. Social consumers are expanding beyond the Millennial demographic, as social-savvy individuals are migrating from the edge to the center of technology adoption and prowess. As they do, social networks and new-media apps and services become their platforms of choice.

All signs, according to this study, point toward greater investment in time, money and resources to better understand and excel in social media.

New dayparts and revenue channels

There will be a greater focus on developing new dayparts for restaurant marketers. Breakfast is one of the fastest-growing dayparts in the industry today. However, it is one of the hardest dayparts for convincing consumers to switch to your brand or to change their morning eating habits. When we opened a new Noah's Bagels, it took at least five appetizing offers to get consumers to change their behavior and make Noah's their morning ritual.

Catering is not a new revenue channel, but with today's social-media applications, catering is a whole new ballgame for restaurant marketers. Today's savvy restaurant marketers are using online catering resources, and some are creating custom catering platforms, such as Boudin Bakeries, which has increased catering sales 300 percent in nine months with an enterprise, Web-based program.

Offering products online, bottling signature items and partnering with grocery retailers is a must for restaurant marketers. Huge brand awareness is garnered by having your brand in the grocery store freezer or bottled-products sections. Taking your signature menu item and partnering with a food manufacturer to produce proprietary products is a channel worth exploring.

Integrate, integrate, integrate

Integration of all marketing communications is essential to garnering the best results. For example, if you plan to introduce a new menu item, how will you communicate that to drive awareness and trial? It's about consumer touch points. Every place a guest can see, hear or touch has to be part of the marketing plan. The e-mail blast, the Facebook post, the tweet, and coupon drop and advertising all have to work together to create a louder voice.

Communicate sustainability, health and ingredients

Consumers want to know the source of their food. Those brands that can articulate their ingredients and product sourcing are winning big with consumers. Marketers must weave multiple messages to include social responsibility, recycling and product sourcing, and to share calories, the amount of sodium and other nutrition data. Creating communications to get "credit" with guests is imperative today.

Fast casual is the name of the game

Today's consumers want better-quality food but without taking too much time away from their busy schedules. The fast-casual segment has changed the way people eat, and marketers of these brands are the ones to watch. If your brand is a casual-dining restaurant, find ways to offer a faster service for your guests, such as boxed lunches to go, beef up your catering sales team, and try a quick-lunch menu to see if you can capture some of those guests who have with little time but appreciate your brand and food.

Responsible marketing

Today's marketers must be socially responsible. With soy-based inks and recycled-paper products all readily available, all point-of-purchase materials should be printed using recyclable materials whenever possible. Consumables, such as cups, tray liners and other logoed to-go packaging, need to be made with recycled materials for today's green and sustainable-savvy consumers.

Clutter test

With so many restaurant brands for consumers to choose, the most important test a restaurant marketer should use before rolling out any promotion, publicity stunt, advertising campaign or packaging is the clutter test to ensure your brand is standing out from the rest. Collect one of each of your brand's direct competitors' cups or packaging and

compare all of them together to be sure your brand stands out. Another test I like to use is called the gutter test. Smash your cup in the gutter and see if you can tell which brand is yours when you drive by. Cup logos should be seen from your car to the curb.

Get moving

This isn't first lady Michelle Obama's cry; it's time for restaurant marketers to get moving. Local store marketing is still the most effective and least expensive strategy for smart restaurant marketers. Most patrons of your restaurant come from within the three-mile radius, and being a part of the community has never been more important to stand out from the competition. Give your general managers and franchisees tools and tips, and send them into their three-mile radius to introduce themselves. Arm them with menus, offers and samples. When they get moving, so will your sales.

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