



Marketing Wisely

When the economy is down, engagement should be up.

Recently many restaurant operators are looking at empty dining rooms and slower than usual sales. In times of a tough economic climate, it's no secret that consumers have become increasingly cautious and fearful.

A pause in consumption prompts personal reflection. Consumers are asking, "What's really important to me?" Not surprisingly, time will remain the ultimate luxury. Recession or no recession, time well spent will remain the ultimate goal and how guests feel eating at a restaurant needs to be time well spent.

So restaurateurs should take heed. People love spending time well. However, time well spent is not just about finding balance in life or connecting with loved ones. Nor is it a high-priced luxury experience such as limo rides or four-star vacations. Ultimately, consumers spend a great deal of precious time going out to eat. Therefore, tying a brand to quality time is a concept with huge implications.

For instance, consumers surround themselves with brands that engage them and make them feel they are spending their time well. They're gravitating more toward experience than assets and goods. Finding ways to make your restaurant brand add life to the experience should be a priority on any restaurant marketer's to-do list.

The approach of creating a meaningful experience starts with engaging your guests. Engagement is the new awareness. And return-on-engagement (ROE) is the new ROI. Put another way, ROE is more customer-centric, a more outwardly approach than ROI.

So restaurants need to boost ROE, but how? As with any broad-scale change in a company's thinking, a true commitment to engagement requires senior management to commit first. That said there's much that restaurant marketers can do. The first step is learning to be a proverbial fly on the wall. Don't launch that new Web site unless you have a clear idea about who your guests are and the experience they perceive. It is also essential to be creative about adopting ways that customers can give you input.

When creating your brand messaging, consider employing public relations. What is going to get my guests truly engaged? Understand the importance of associating your brand with something authentic.

For example, Boudin SF, the fast casual concept developed by the 100 year old San Francisco sour dough Boudin Bakery company, gave away 365 loaves of bread to the first 100 guests at a recent grand opening. Guests lined up the day before and spent the night. Into the morning, guests learned the history of Boudin and shared their love and memories of Boudin's sourdough bread. Boudin entertained kids and parents alike in bread toss games for prizes, and were treated to signature menu samples before the doors opened. Overall, guests shared in an authentic experience that proved to be a great return on their time, while Boudin SF got to share their favorite tradition with guests.



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When searching for restaurants worth their time, consumers do not want to dig through the clutter. Other public relations strategies such as sampling, tasting events, and fundraisers allow brands to further engage guests, keeping them at the top of the list when they go out to eat. For example, Pacific Catch, a San Francisco Bay Area restaurant with three locations, hosted a sushi and sake tasting event to introduce new menu items to VIPs, community members, and the press. A large crowd attended and enjoyed samples of the delicious sushi, and the restaurant's sake vendor provided sake pouring and tasting education. As guests departed, they were given gift bags with a Pacific Catch menu, a coupon for a free appetizer on their next visit, and a special gift from the sake vendor. Pacific Catch impressed the local community and established positive relationships with their guests. The event also garnered positive publicity.



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Most importantly, realize your guests are a source of feedback and ideas. Don't underestimate the power of direct interaction with your customers. During a recent in-person "voice of the guest" initiative, I learned first-hand how one-on-one involvement can provide R&D folks with a far richer and holistic view of both their jobs and the people they serve.

I don't suggest moving ROE to the forefront of a company's branding efforts should mean ROI disappears from a marketer's arsenal. Indeed, it can't. Businesses must be efficient and investments prioritized. But so long as the current economy puts sour and skeptical faces on consumers, it is more important than ever to look at those faces and engage your guests.

The ultimate goal for a restaurant marketer in today's challenging economy is to add to a customer's life experience and engage them—it will be the best return on investment of time and energy when the economy swings north.

Linda Duke is CEO of Duke Marketing, which she founded in 1987 specializing in marketing for multi-location and franchise organizations. She can be reached at duke@dukemarketing.com.