

How to Prepare for the 4 Cs—Part 2

When construction projects or new competitors threaten your business, don't panic: Smart marketing will carry you through the hard times.

By Linda Duke

As I explained in last month's column, pizzeria operators sometimes encounter unexpected problems that can drive away customers. I call them the four Cs: Crisis (a robbery or violent crime committed at your pizzeria, a food-borne illness, etc.); Catastrophe (fire, tornado, flood, etc.); Construction (loss of business due to construction in your area); and Competition (the arrival of another pizzeria near your location).

We considered the first two Cs—Crisis and Catastrophe—in detail last month. Now let's discuss how to deal with the next two Cs—Construction and Competition.

Many pizzerias have faced a situation in which a construction project in the area hurt their business. Not only does the dust and debris cause problems, but so does the change in traffic patterns. Even a short-term project can do lasting damage if your guests can't easily gain access to your building or parking lot. So how do you keep business booming during these difficult times? It all comes down to smart marketing.

1. **Create temporary signage.** For example, create a sign that reads, "Pardon Our Dust—Still Open for Business" and place it in a highly visible area. To draw further attention, tie balloons to the sign. Do whatever it takes to get attention.
2. **Move beyond your four walls.** Get out and meet owners of nearby businesses. Offer to deliver pizzas for lunch or for meetings with clients, even if you don't normally deliver. If you don't have a catering component, now may be the time to create one. Building a catering or large to-go business helps increase sales without customers having to fight for parking spaces or deal with construction issues. Set appointments to meet with these local business owners and go after their business!

3. **Feed the construction crew.** Offer samples and drinks to the workers and turn them into brand ambassadors. Give them



stickers to put on their hard hats or logoed T-shirts to wear on the job. They'll appreciate the promotional items, and you'll get your reward when they come back to eat in your restaurant and tell their friends about you.

4. **Create special events or promotions.** Offer happy hour specials to the construction crew at the end of each working day. After construction is complete, host an "After the Dust Settles" event with food and drink specials to lure back your old customers. Invite the construction crew to the event as well.

And then there's the age-old problem of dealing with a new business rival. The best strategy is to always provide the best product and service from day one, regardless of your competition. Beyond that, here are some other smart marketing ideas:

1. **Don't bad-mouth the competitor.** If anyone asks, your response should be, "We're lucky to have such a great clientele here at our restaurant" and "There is plenty

of business for everyone.” If you bad-mouth your competitor, your employees will do the same. This causes negative attitudes, and it won’t make you look or sound successful.

2. **Be different.** Create a promotion or program that highlights the traits that make you different. If you’re famous for your chicken wings or your awesome kids menu, build on that success and make your customers aware of it. Establish a strong marketing plan and toot your own horn about what you do best.
3. **Don’t stress out.** Most new restaurants will enjoy a honeymoon period. You may even see your own sales decrease for a short time; people like to try new things. But you can lure customers back by providing a better overall customer experience, offering superior food and service and building relationships.
4. **Don’t coupon or discount.** Some operators panic when a competitor moves into their area. They assume they need to offer discounts to compete. But this is not the time for that—it merely suggests that you don’t really

believe your food is worth the prices you’ve always charged. Just keep offering great service and quality food in a friendly, inviting atmosphere and market aggressively, and your regular customers will come back.

5. **Check out your competitor.** Find out what makes them different. Understand their pricing and their business philosophy. What you learn from them will help you make your own business better. Introduce yourself to the owner and welcome him or her to the neighborhood. Your competitor is not your enemy. If you think of your rival as another pizzeria that’s bringing more potential customers to your area, it could actually be good for your business! 🍕



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