



Restaurant Promotions

Delivering measurable increases in food and beverage revenues can be achieved with simple restaurant promotional techniques. There are thousands of possible tactics you can employ to drive revenues without any reliance on mass media advertising. Here are few of the best restaurant promotion ideas to get your own creative marketing wheels turning:

◇ Publicity Stunts ◇

Stunt is a word with negative connotations, but I wanted to use a word that conjured up images that are different than traditional press relations efforts. Sending a standard press release about a new menu may result in a small write-up. To cut through the clutter and generate extensive exposure, you need a newsworthy angle. Something like a guest bartender and/or waiter/waitress, really unique contest or other major event. Think beyond typical events like golf tournaments and simple fundraisers. Challenge your staff or marketing firm to think what you would have to do to make it into the Guinness Book of World Records. Challenge them to think much bigger and come up with ideas that tie in to what your restaurant stands for but also have potential for national exposure. If you create events that have only local appeal, you will be limited with your media exposure potential and may not even make the local paper. If you think much larger, you will not have to worry about getting coverage. A well-constructed publicity stunt can be worth its weight in gold in terms of positive exposure for your restaurant. And everybody wants to be associated with a winner.

◇ Public Relations ◇

Public relations has been called advertising that you don't have to pay for. If you have a successful public and media relations program, you will get increased exposure and prestige without spending a fortune. For this to work, you will need to create and publicize newsworthy stories; celebrity guest, celebrity chef, with the keyword being "celebrity". Create angles that are unique and make your restaurant stand out. Also, review your restaurant's marketing and advertising budget to determine the percentage that will be spent on traditional advertising compared to public relations. It's worthwhile to spend 15-30 percent of your budget on a solid public relations program.

Some higher-end restaurants are understandably concerned about publicity stunts and other marketing activities that seem to fly in the face of the exclusivity of their establishment. My answer to that is simple "these tactics will not be appropriate for everyone. That being said, if you are one of the restaurant owners that cringes at the thought of creating buzz in the community at large, I urge you to think about your position.

Everyone wants to be associated with a winner. For some of your regulars, the whole reason they frequent your restaurant in the first place is because it's exclusive and their being a part of that is an extension of their self-brand and identity. Creating buzz will not distract from that, it will reinforce it in many cases. The key is how the publicity comes across. If done correctly, it supports your position in the market, exclusivity and prestige.



◇ Bouncebacks ◇

This is a tool that bounces guests from peak times to off-peak times and can also work to encourage frequency in your food and beverage operations. While simple in theory and execution, this tactic can produce far more in revenues per dollar invested than traditional advertising. All you do is offer incentives at the point of purchase on popular services to encourage the guest to try your restaurant another time. For instance, if you are busy for lunch and need to drive sales for dinner, offer bounceback certificates that can only be redeemed during dinner hours. Test different offers and delivery vehicles and track response rates for each to hone in on what works best with your clientele.

◇ Stop Discounting ◇

Discounting tells your customers and prospective customers, "We don't deserve full price, so we'll be happy to lower our rates to make up for the difference." And, in a related topic, never offer coupons, only offer certificates. There is a big difference in perception.

◇ Business Socials ◇

A no brainer, right? You would be surprised how unreceptive some restaurant owners are to hosting business socials with outside organizations at their establishment. However, if you select the right group to partner with, you can leverage their resources to promote your restaurant, and you can also target your core audience. Host socials where the food is center stage. Arrange photo opportunities that include your displays in the background and submit to local media. Partnering with a business or charitable organization works on many levels and can help you stretch your marketing budget while still delivering higher returns on investment than can be achieved with traditional advertising.

◇ Sampling ◇

Tasting is believing and if you would grade your food a B minus or above, you need to get it in potential customers' mouths. That's the best way to build recognition and it is more effective and less expensive than advertising. Every public event that draws your core audience is an opportunity to offer samples of your product. Pick the best 2-3 items on your menu that can be easily transported and get some solid representatives of your restaurant out to meet and greet at these off-property functions.

◇ Toss up Tuesdays ◇

Promote this program through your existing customer base. Pick Tuesdays (or your slowest food day) and flip for the food tab. Guests will have a 50 percent chance of getting their food bill paid by the restaurant. This attracts your guests' attention much more than a "buy one get one free" promotion. Guests are also more likely to have higher check averages than normal because there is a chance they will not have to pay. It creates a tremendous attention among your core guest base. You lose a flip, right it off as advertising!



◇ Menu Bingo ◇

This is a great tactic for encouraging frequency and getting members to try different items on the menu. You simply create bingo cards that have different menu items in boxes. Have the cards designed with five columns and five rows. You can also promote other non-food items such as merchandise, cookbooks, and gift certificates. Guests have an allotted period of time - 60 days for example - to complete a connection just as they would with a bingo card. Once they try five items in any direction, they receive a gift certificate or other incentives that are roughly equal to one of the items purchased.

◇ Birthday Program ◇

Research shows that 50 percent of all Americans eat out on their birthday. This presents an opportunity for establishments with solid birthday programs. So why don't restaurant owners/management do more to take advantage of this? It offers a chance for you to capture your increased share of the market. A birthday program can be executed through new automated tools like those that are available through e-mail marketing service providers. You simply plug in the birthday and e-mail address of your members, and a secure and nicely designed e-mail is sent to them at a time you determine in advance. The system knows who and when to send the e-mail to and also tracks view rates for reporting that allows you to know how well your program is working. You can also have the e-mail include a redemption code that will allow you to track what percentage of the e-mails are bringing in guests and calculate a return on investment. Recent research has shown that retention based e-mail marketing is 300 to 400 percent higher than traditional vehicles such as direct mail and faxes. It's a great way to communicate and manage your club's birthday program.

The restaurant industry has been conditioned to believe that only traditional marketing efforts can be applied to grow sales because it's what everyone else is doing. Fact is, the restaurant industry is getting more competitive and will continue to do so. In the face of increased competition, the most effective strategy is to differentiate your restaurant from the others and create excitement in a way that reinforces your positioning strategy. Again, restaurant promotions are only gimmicky if they are created that way; it is entirely possible to execute these restaurant promotions in a way that is completely in alignment with the image of your restaurant no matter how exclusive.

"Smart marketing is best achieved through non-traditional techniques that are executed inside your restaurant and among your existing customer base."