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Back to Basics: Brand and Customer Traffic By Jim Matorin

The heat in the kitchen is getting really intense. Start with rising costs—food, fuel, labor and real estate—and throw in increased competition. The result is everyone reassessing his or her overall sales and profit goals, getting anxious about the road ahead, and beginning to break a sweat.

Warning: This is not another one of those *“it’s time to scrutinize your supply chain processes to optimize your profit”* articles. This is a marketing article. I have the good fortune to listen to a wide cross section of operators on a daily basis. Consequently, I have deciphered that for a restaurateur to be successful from a marketing perspective, it will come down to two factors: the strength of the restaurant’s brand and keeping customers coming in the door.

Brand – Admit it, when “brand” is mentioned, your immediate connotation is Nike, McDonald’s, Starbucks, some of the most amazing brand success stories in America. But you don’t have to be a “Giant” to establish a brand. The true definition of a brand is all about identity of your product/services. What does it stand for? How credible is it? How does it resonate with the customer? Every restaurateur needs to be able answer these questions and review and communicate them on a regular basis.

Customer Traffic – Despite all the operational efficiencies a restaurant implements—menu and procurement optimization, competent labor practices, energy conservation, etc.—you still have to fill your seats. As a result, every restaurateur needs to design marketing strategies that increase overall patron reach and frequency.

Trust me, marketing is not rocket science. Over the next few months of articles I will explore various ways each one of you can build your restaurant’s brand, as well as increase your reach and frequency. My goal is for each one of you to remain in the kitchen without having to step outside to cool off.

Hot off the Press: Publicity Tips

The best marketing is the kind you can’t buy. Here are a few ways to get your operation noticed:

- **Get a copy of the editorial calendar.** Call every newspaper or magazine that you want to get into and ask for this free listing. You’ll find the topics for the year and if there’s a section where you fit—or if you have a story idea—query the editor months ahead of time.
- **Invite the food editor to lunch.** Tell her that you admire her work (if that’s true) and that you’d like to offer yourself as a resource. Reporters need sources and they’re always looking for people they can call. Eventually, she will write about you.
- **Send your newsletter to members of the press.** If you publish materials for your customers that include upcoming events, new menu items, food trends, new employees, etc., send a copy to your media list. Be sure to accompany any big news—new chef, new concept, special event—with a formal news release.

Train to Retain

Last year, both the National Restaurant Association and *QSR Magazine* reported that the number one challenge facing restaurateurs in 2008 were employment issues – specifically retention.

How do you retain great people? Research shows employees who receive ongoing training are more likely to stay with an organization. Training, not just for new hires, but all for employees, shows your team that you value them. They also see that through training, they will continue to advance their careers and put more money in their pockets.

Make training a daily priority. Make it your goal as an owner or manager to teach your staff something new every day. I know what you are thinking – you’ve already got enough on your plate besides teaching and training your staff every day. Training doesn’t have to be a long, formal process. Your pre-shift huddles are a great way train on a daily basis. Use those five minutes before a shift to role-play how to sell today’s special, brainstorm descriptive words to make your food and beverages sound more appealing to guests, or review wine pairings with your most popular dishes. Make it upbeat, informative and interactive. The more your staff participates, the more they learn.

There’s an old saying that goes, “You get what you focus on.” By creating a daily focus on training you are reinforcing positive behaviors and teaching your team new skills. In turn you are creating employee loyalty and improving your retention rate.

Ask STS!

We’re kind of a casual restaurant, but we do sell bottles of wine. My staff hates to suggest them because they’re worried about opening and serving them correctly. How can I reassure them?

Well, practice does make perfect. Many operations allow servers to open house wines for the bartender before shifts. Others call in vendors and ask for “dummy” bottles to practice with. If you get really ambitious, you can host a wine tasting night at your operation and rotate bottle opening between servers. In this casual setting, it’s all right if the server struggles a bit.

Here are some general tips to go over during these practice sessions:

- Encourage servers to use their own wine openers and practice using it.
- Remind servers to show the label to the host before opening the bottle.
- Once open, remove the remainder of the foil, if necessary.
- Pour a small amount into the host’s glass. If he or she approves, serve the guests, ladies first, before returning to the host to complete his or her pour.
- Pour briskly. You’ll dribble if you go too slowly.
- Pour each glass about two-thirds full and be sure not to ever touch the rim of the glass... even with the bottle.

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