

building sales during the slow season



Now that the Christmas selling season is over you're probably convinced that by the end of January the ring of the cash register will be nothing

but a distant memory. Relax, there's plenty you can do to beef up business during this slower season. In fact, this is the ideal time to host a range of special events that make the most of these cold winter months. Start with a few of these traffic-building ideas:

PANCAKE BREAKFAST — Decorate your tables with gingham tablecloths, dress your staff in overalls and pour out the maple syrup! Stage a pancake eating contest and offer the winner a year's supply of pancake mix and maple syrup and an extra large T-shirt featuring your restaurant logo.

WORLD TOUR OF FOOD — Plan a different international menu for each week in January and decorate your

restaurant to reflect the various countries. For example, for a Mexican theme decorate with piñatas and hire a mariachi band to go with tacos, burritos and other Mexican dishes. Stock up on the wines and beers from each of the featured countries, and make suggestions pairing beverages with entrées.

INTRODUCE THE CHEF — Bring your cooks out to the front-of-the-house to flip pizzas, chop vegetables, boil pasta, flame cheese or whip cream. The name of the game is to make some noise, create an attraction and have some fun.

WILD WILD WEST — Barbecue steaks and ribs, bring out a line-dancing troupe and get stomping! Ask customers to come dressed up in cowboy hats, and leather-fringed shirts, or hand out cardboard cowboy hats. Hire line dancing professionals to give patrons a quick 10-minute lesson. Give away country CDs and line dancing videos as prizes.

DOING THE CAT WALK — Host a fashion show at a local high school

or college with a theme such as "kids wear" or "business wear," and promote the event in your restaurant and in the community. Offer appetizers and samples of entrées throughout the show, or host a buffet dinner following the event.

ADDITIONAL TRAFFIC BOOSTERS:

Call local television stations and offer to cook your best entrée on the air.

Contact a local ballet or theatre group and offer to provide a reception for the artists and patrons in exchange for their mailing list, then invite them yourself.

Develop a special children's menu featuring variations on popular kid's cartoons, characters or games.

Cross promote your restaurant with local tourist attractions or seasonal events. For example, offer customers vouchers for 10 per cent off the price of local skating rinks, ski resorts, hotels or winter carnivals.

Offer customers free items such as recipe cards, cooking classes, samples and/or items cross promoted from another supplier, but ensure that the item has a perceived value.

Offer low-fat and low-sodium menu items for customers committed to losing weight and eating healthy after the holiday season.

Diane Chiasson, FCSI, president of Toronto-based Chiasson Consultants Inc., is a food and retail merchandising and marketing specialist who has worked with high profile independent restaurants and casinos, and major restaurant and hotel chains for the past 16 years. ☕

Valentine's Day Traffic Builders

Valentine's Day is just weeks away, so start planning now. Here's some ideas to get you started.

♥ **WEDDING GIVEAWAYS** — Enlist the help of promotional sponsors and offer a complete wedding package as a grand prize. Promote the contest from the beginning of the month, and have patrons fill out a ballot with their wedding date.

You'll soon find you have a long mailing list of brides and grooms-to-be which you can also use for your catering sales team.

♥ Sell heart-shaped candy, cookies and cakes, or chocolate kisses and roses, and package them in red, pink and white ribbon. Include sugar-free and low-fat varieties.

♥ Plan a romantic Valentine's menu and post it in the restaurant well before Feb. 14.

♥ Use your restaurant windows for a themed display, and showcase pre-wrapped gift ideas near the cash register.

♥ Call preferred customers to let them know about your special Valentine's Day dinner, and send them a Valentine redeemable for 20 per cent off a future visit.