



Diane Chiasson

Six tips for successful catering

It is an obvious step as a pizzeria to offer catering of your menu, but there are a lot of chefs, individuals and restaurants – including many big restaurant chains – all doing the same.

What should you do to differentiate yourself from this crowd and successfully market your catering menu? Here are six tips to help you cater better.

1. DEDICATE STAFF AND TIME TO PROMOTING YOUR FUNCTIONS

It is important not to start a catering operation half-heartedly. Even though it may seem easy to expand into catering as a restaurant owner, to be successful, it is important to put time and energy into actually promoting and marketing your pizzeria's catering function. It will be hard to do this properly if you do not have dedicated time or staff assigned to this. The other points of this article illustrate just how much "sweat" is actually involved in building the relationships that will drive your catering business forward.

2. BE PERSONAL WITH CLIENTELE

Connecting with people is the key to your success and finding ways to impress people is vitally important. Networking with wedding planners, golf clubs, sports clubs, exhibition centres and bridal shops, to name but a few, may seem obvious but it is such an essential component of your business. This means you have to visit businesses, introduce yourself and tell them what you have to offer. Ask to leave your cards or menus in their shops; offer to give a discount to their clients if they refer you.

3. LET THEM TASTE YOUR FOOD

Don't just meet people, go one step further and use your food to get into the minds

and stomachs of local businesses by taking some of your food along and letting them sample what you're capable of. Freebies can make a big difference when selling your catering. People are far more likely to remember you, especially if your food is delicious. Reach out to the corporate community with tasting events. Create a small and intimate tasting with 10 or more really good and qualified leads and make a major impression through your exemplary food and service. Make this a regular event that you plan for and organize, and make it a major part of your marketing strategy.

4. TARGET KEY EXPANSION AREAS

Want to book more weddings? Be where weddings are planned: at wedding expos. This is a great way to meet directly with couples actively seeking companies to help them plan their weddings. Expos are also great places to create partnerships with other event and wedding industry professionals.

For the corporate sector, law offices, ad agencies and financial institutions all have long hours with staff working continually on projects where meal breaks can be too much of an interruption. Visit these potential clients in your area and hand out your menu, along with a coupon for a free meal, or invite the receptionist or office manager to sample your lunch catering menu. Try to get your menu in front of the person who will make decisions about office orders.

Don't neglect the consumer market. Apart from weddings, there is a lot of potential for you to be successful with family reunions, graduations, bar mitzvahs, picnics and birthdays. Sending local mailers out to affluent areas with menus and service details is a catering business necessity.

5. CREATE A DISTINCTIVE BRAND AND IMAGE

Branding is key to helping you differentiate your catering offering from everything else that is out there. Look at how food trucks do this with bright, sophisticated graphics or niche foods. The other day I saw a Sushitto truck (offering sushi and burrito combinations!). Your catering function must give people the impression of style and excellence and stay in the minds of your clientele. This should be reflected in your menus, mailers, brochures, letterhead and other print items. A catering business should look amazing, from the food you present to the letter you send out to a client. Unless you are also a graphic design genius, make sure you get your logo and brand image designed by a professional. It will pay off in the long run.

6. CREATE SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

The key to successful social media marketing is to create content, rather than to market directly. Engage potential customers with stories about your pizzeria restaurant or why you offer catering on your website and social media channels. Then go one step further and add your content to online communities that align with your customers' profiles.

There is a lot you can do to promote your catering business. The important thing is to put the time into it, develop a marketing plan and actually do some of the things you identify as important so that it does become successful. •

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