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How to market to customers in the cold winter months

The winter months, especially just after the holidays, can be the most depressing time of the year. Research has shown that weather can have a great effect on the buying habits of consumers, with many restaurant and food-service operators reporting that bad weather usually comes with a decline in sales.

The post-holiday months are also a time when people start their New Year's resolutions, with the most common resolution being to lose weight. Restaurant owners and operators should consider the factors affecting their customers' consuming habits during the winter and try to market with them in mind. Pizza operators, especially, can take the opportunity to grab this segment of the market by playing up home delivery and pizza's status as a comfort food.

The following ideas will help you battle the winter blues:

1. PROMOTE COMFORT

The holidays are over, and we are now faced with cold, dark days for several more months to come. Consumers are looking for comfort. As a pizzeria operator, consider creating a comforting winter menu, with an emphasis on the word "comforting." Adding a hot, Italian-inspired vegetable soup to your menu can easily be done using most of the ingredients you already have on hand. Turn pizza dough into fresh, hot rolls that can be used to dip into the soup. Create winter pizzas that feature such comforting food items as roasted root vegetables, squash, caramelized onions, fennel, roasted pears and apples, and roasted tomatoes. Offer a pizza fondue that is fun and entertaining for your customers to

order and eat. Be sure to also put more hot beverages on your menu, including ciders and hot chocolate.

2. RAMP UP YOUR HOME DELIVERY

When it's freezing cold outside, and cars are covered in a layer of ice, the last thing people want to do is go outside to get dinner. Pizzerias can get a leg up on competitors by promoting delivery service. Create a direct mail marketing campaign for your area using the cold weather as an excuse to call your pizza operation to deliver a fresh, hot meal in minutes. Be sure to offer free delivery to sway potential customers from ordering food from other delivery services.

3. GIVE OUT 'SNOW DAY' COUPONS

Offer "snow day" specials to draw more customers into your pizzeria. Create a marketing campaign that will get consumers to choose your store over anything else. For example, tell customers that if more than an inch of snow falls in your area, you will offer a discount on a pizza.

4. USE MOBILE MARKETING TO REACH OUT

During a snowstorm, most people are bundled on the couch, scrolling through their mobile phones. People are also more apt than usual to take to mobile and social channels to monitor the weather and see how others are coping. Take this opportunity to deliver a message to

your customers. Upload photos of fresh, steaming hot, delicious pizzas coming out of the oven. Offer special deals to encourage people to get out of their houses and come to your pizzeria.

5. NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION PIZZA

While many customers are seeking carb-loaded, comfort foods, don't forget about the many people who have vowed to lose weight as their New Year's resolution. Consider adding a low-calorie, healthy option to your menu that still offers comfort, for example, a thin-crust pizza with low-fat cheese that is loaded with vegetables, or a warm salad.

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6. MAKE YOUR PIZZERIA WARM AND COZY

People tend to hibernate during the winter months, so why not create an environment where your customers feel comfortable enough to hibernate? Consider installing an electric fireplace or bringing in comfy couches with pillows and blankets. Invest in some board games, magazines and books. Turn your operation into a place your customers will find comforting to visit on a cold, winter day. •

Diane Chiasson, FCSI, president of Chiasson Consultants Inc., has been helping food service, hospitality and retail operators increase sales for over 25 years by providing innovative and revenue-increasing food service and retail merchandising programs, interior design, branding, menu engineering, marketing and promotional campaigns, and much more. Contact her at 416-926-1338, toll-free at 1-888-926-6655 or chiasson@chiassonconsultants.com, or visit www.chiassonconsultants.com