

ADJUSTING YOUR RESTAURANT MARKETING STRATEGY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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When an unexpected outside factor impacts our industry, companies must rethink their marketing strategy in order to be able to minimize any long-term financial damage and, in the best case, continue future growth amidst budget cuts and spending freezes. There has been much written about how restaurant and foodservice operators can adjust their procedures to keep their staff and guests healthy. The National Restaurant Association has created [this page](#) where up-to-date restaurant specific information can be found. It's still too soon to determine what the long-term impact will be on the foodservice industry nationwide, as a recent **Technomic study** determined, but the short-term impact is being felt by operators of all sizes in many US markets.

BUT WHAT SHOULD MARKETING TEAMS BE DOING?

Marketers are tasked with bringing guests to the table, but that can be difficult when budgets are being cut, or in the case of high convention and visitor markets, impossible when the guests simply aren't there. Additionally, some markets may face ethical concerns about encouraging people to dine out with so many unknowns about the virus and its impact on high-risk individuals. To aggressively market in cities where governments have requested a reduction in large public gatherings could be perceived as irresponsible. It may seem like there is nothing to be done but sit this one out and wait. Not so.

Forward-thinking restaurant companies have their marketing teams busy at work looking at long term planning and finding ways to drive more efficiency from their current efforts and already committed marketing spend.

FOCUS ON LONG-TERM BRAND LOYALTY VS. TODAY'S SALES

Maya Angelou said it best: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Now is the time to focus on building and strengthening long term relationships with guests - both individual and corporate.

SHIFT YOUR FOCUS TO BRAND MARKETING

While many paid marketing activities may have to be put on hold, earned, owned and shared media are channels that are likely still available. People are spending more time online, so while they may not immediately come into your restaurant, you can still build a relationship with them. What you share and how will depend on your brand, but the opportunity exists to communicate and engage with your guests without a specific call to action or call to dine. Highlight your team members expertise, showcase recipes, ideas and spring menu items. Avoid messaging related to the virus unless it becomes necessary to explain any reduced hours or closures. Repurpose influencer and other user-generated content you have previously invested in. Restaurants provide an escape from the realities of daily life and can continue to provide that for people online as well. Don't be as concerned with metrics around today's marketing, the important thing here is to stay strong for when this all passes. That's not to say that the relationships you build with customers won't help you win the diners who are dining today. Rather, it's important to remember that the metrics for the marketing you do now should be developed with a long-term view in mind.

PEOPLE ARE SPENDING MORE TIME ONLINE, SO WHILE THEY MAY NOT IMMEDIATELY COME INTO YOUR RESTAURANT, YOU CAN STILL BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM.

BE FLEXIBLE

Times of shared uncertainty offer restaurants the opportunity to connect with guests on a very human level. Let people see your values in your cancellation policies and in how your staff accommodates last minute changes. Waive minimums and other cancellation penalties. The fees may have been agreed upon and might seem like a fair way to recoup some cost, but it's a short term gain. It has been proven that it is much more costly (both in time and marketing dollars) to find a new guest than to retain a current one.

Help your team to recognize that the event planner that cancelled the dinner for 25 is also cancelling 25 hotel rooms, 25 airline tickets, transportation and other entertainment elements that he or she worked on for months. Encourage them to make things easier in whatever ways they can. Consider providing re-booking gifts or incentives. This is not just about passively waiving cancellation fees. This is about actually caring about the person on the other end of the phone. When the time comes for re-booking restaurants who showed flexibility will certainly be at the top of planner's lists.

MAXIMIZE PERCEIVED VALUE

CREATE AN AMAZING GUEST EXPERIENCE

People dine out to feel connected. Ensure that everyone who *does* come into your restaurant has an amazing experience. This may seem to be obvious, but look critically at the experience. If your dining room is less full, consider rearranging tables so that it feels comfortably full and bustling. Make sure your staff is highly attentive and positive with guests. Take advantage of a less busy time to tackle outstanding training items, and perhaps help mitigate the impact of lower guest counts on hourly workers. Consider leveraging partners to provide additional beverage or service training. You will likely recoup the cost later, not only in terms of increased skill but also in terms of greater staff loyalty. Of course, make sure that your staff is not only being vigilant in extra cleaning procedures, but that they can explain those increased efforts in a way that doesn't reflect negatively on your normal procedures. Consider providing additional surprise and delight moments to ensure that people feel great about their decision to dine with you.

ENSURE THAT EVERYONE WHO DOES COME INTO YOUR RESTAURANT HAS AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE.

GIFT CARDS, DELIVERY AND FUTURE EVENT BOOKING INCENTIVES OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH LOYAL GUESTS

As operations teams look for ways to generate revenue, marketers can directly contribute by re-focusing efforts to online gift card sales and, if applicable, delivery. Consider adjusting messaging or increasing incentives. These kinds of campaigns can help generate immediate revenue now, and can have additional impact if they are positioned as exclusive offers to loyal subscribers. **Find ways to incentivize guests who may be planning events and happenings over the summer and fall by removing minimums, making deposits refundable or adding in extra complimentary add-ons.** If you are in an area where companies are encouraging their employees to work from home, reach out to those companies to set up exclusive gift card offers that their employees can choose to use now or later. The communication around these efforts shouldn't be tied to the virus, but rather presented as enticing offers and reminders that you are there.

GET READY TO CONNECT WITH TOMORROW'S GUESTS

Stay calm. Emotion clouds thinking and can cause mistakes. Don't make decisions before you have to and consider unintended consequences. Consult your trusted advisors. Do what you need to do now to keep all the resources that you will want and need to be ready to come back aggressively.

PLAN ON MORE AGGRESSIVE EFFORTS FOR HISTORICALLY SLOWER TIMES THAN YOU WOULD HAVE OTHERWISE IMPLEMENTED.

It may still be cold where you are, but prepare your summer happy hour launch. Forget Christmas in July. Get your marketing ready for the holidays now. Work with operations teams to identify holiday features and promotions now. Even if they have been decided upon, you may wish to look to higher margin menu items

to promote as seasonal features later in the year. Plan on more aggressive efforts for historically slower times than you would have otherwise implemented. Reach out to your partners and purveyors to build new partnerships. Partnerships are always a great way to extend your marketing reach, but especially at a time when you'll need to make up lost sales. Is now the right time to look at new market segments or plan to launch new offerings later this year? Your creative agencies may have a number of projects on hold, so take advantage of their availability and get ahead of the game. Do you have a new location or new concept in development? Move up the timeline on creative and brand development. You may be able to negotiate better rates for longer term projects or extend payment terms.

Those of us who have been in the industry long enough know that hospitality feels the economic impact first. We also know that when this passes - and it most certainly will - people will look for connection. Business will get back to usual and people will want to find ways to spend time with their family and friends and their favorite restaurants will be where they go. Those who rebound in the future will be the ones who kept their marketing engines in motion.

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