

Executive Q&A: Linda Duke Says Today's Customers Need More

Linda Duke offers creative ideas for attracting customers, especially during these penny-pinching times.

By Amelia Levin, Contributing Editor -- Chain Leader, 5/27/2009 10:32:00 AM

For more than 20 years, Linda Duke has helped restaurants improve their brand awareness and image in the press to help bolster their bottom lines. The principal of **Duke Marketing** and author of *Four Star Restaurant Marketing Cookbook: Recipes for Restaurateurs*, Duke offers creative ideas for attracting customers, especially during these penny-pinching times.



Linda Duke, founder of Duke Marketing and author of *Four Star Restaurant Marketing: Recipes for Restaurateurs*.

What are some top tips you can offer restaurants to weather the current economic climate?

I think it's important right now to really engage your guests and clients by providing top-notch customer service and giving them something extra.

Local store marketing is huge right now. Get out of your four walls. Give out menu samples and offer to cater events and parties. Or invite people in with a free appetizer coupon.

Also, fundraisers can help this cause. Everyone is hurting, so offer to host a fundraiser with a percentage of proceeds going to a shared organization.

In addition, stepping up your public relations efforts right now is so important, regardless of your financial situation. Take food and meal coupons to radio show hosts and local television stations, or offer to demonstrate your menu items. The payoff in new customers gained, and old ones kept, outweighs the costs.

What are some newer areas of marketing that may be beneficial for operators to explore?

There are a number of online tools available to provide very cost-effective ways to engage guests and generate awareness as well as a fan base. Text ordering and online ordering are showing real worth to restaurant operators and, in my opinion, will proliferate to all restaurants as the norm in the near future. Facebook has 150 million users and 600,000 new accounts opened per day. It's almost as if social media is becoming the new mass media.

Social media also requires one important characteristic: transparency. It's about listening to your customers' concerns and interests and showing authenticity in your responses to their wants and needs. Social media marketing tactics work best with anything that has a beginning and an end: a promotion, an event, a specific call to action or campaign. It's perfectly suited for restaurant operators because it builds frequency and loyalty with fans of your brand.

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What is an underutilized method of marketing among operators?

Local store marketing. The act of generating awareness and sales within a business' three- to five-mile radius is probably the most underutilized marketing strategy by this segment.

The reason for this is most local store marketing tactics require time and effort, which for some operators is tough. They would rather run an advertisement or a coupon to drive traffic so they don't have to spend time or effort. But the bottom line for niche marketing is that you must be fully committed to that target audience to have any hope of developing long-term loyalty. If you are not visibly active within the three- to five-mile radius surrounding your business, you don't stand a chance against the larger chains who can afford mass media and advertising.

With the right tactics, easy directions or training, any restaurant employee can assist with these local efforts, which in the end garners big results without much investment. And as more consumer look to support their local communities and businesses, using local marketing tactics are certainly timely and appropriate.

To order Duke's book: www.marketing-cookbook.com

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