

Foodservice Updates

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Ghost kitchens: Do the numbers work for you?

Ghost kitchens are continuing their climb: By 2030, they are predicted to hold a 50 percent share of the drive-thru and takeaway foodservice markets, respectively, according to Statista. As restaurant operators think about the best ways to serve existing customers and tap into new markets, ghost kitchens could be an important part of a business strategy. Perhaps you had to close a brick-and-mortar location before or during the pandemic – or you want to enter a new market that sounds like a good match for your brand. You could open a small brick-and-mortar location in a high-traffic area to collect information. But you may be able to gain the same – or better – insights with a ghost kitchen operating with a much smaller real estate footprint in a less-expensive area. Ghost kitchens' ability to help brands test market viability in a low-risk way is exactly why brands like Famous Dave's consider them to be important to their business model. As Al Hank, COO of Famous Dave's parent company BBQ Holdings Inc., said in an interview with 1851 Franchise: "That is typically a multi-million-dollar test, and you never know what the outcome is going to be, but ghost kitchens allow you to do it in a much more cost-effective manner." So exactly how cost-effective might a ghost kitchen be for you? Dan Fleischmann of the restaurant equity investor Kitchen Fund developed a ghost kitchen calculator, available at Restaurant Dive, to help concepts get an initial sense of whether a ghost-kitchen concept might make financial sense. You plug in some key data about the business, cost structure and volume assumptions, then the calculator projects the resulting profit or loss, as well as the return on invested capital.



The trickle-down benefits of loyalty tech

Staffing is difficult enough right now – but it's even more challenging when an operator must schedule a team to work an unpredictable, potentially sleepy day part. (It's part of the reason why companies like First Watch have a single, 7 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. shift.) But what if there were another way? The technology you use to customize data-driven, strategic guest offers is designed to improve sales performance during specific day parts. When you have improved, consistent traffic, you require more hours from staff, who are now able to get the hours and pay they need to stay with the business. Is there a day part in your business that has great potential but needs a lift to be able to retain staff? Consider how you can use your loyalty technology to turn the customer who stops in for an afternoon coffee each day into someone who also comes in for breakfast or lunch.



Unleash the power of the text

Texting, as a means of connecting with guests, has a number of critical benefits: It's an intuitive technology that everyone – regardless of demographics – knows how to use. It doesn't require a download, so there is little commitment involved. Finally, it's that rare technology that has the power to immediately get the attention of the recipient: It's common to ignore an email, call or social media alert – but not a text. In fact, the click-through rate for text offers is more than 9 percent higher than any other digital channel, according to TechJury. So are you using text messaging to its fullest potential? Once your guests opt into it, ensure you're using text to send important, just-in-time offers – don't bombard them with untargeted promotions that will quickly become noise. Offer discount codes good for a future order, an invitation to a special event, contest or tasting, a birthday treat, or a prompt to reengage a customer who hasn't ordered in recent weeks.





This calls for comfort

Consumers have always turned to restaurants for comfort – and amid an ongoing years-long pandemic and a shaky economy, comfort is especially welcome right now. A Food & Wine survey of chefs at the end of 2021 revealed that comfort foods are likely to maintain their hold in 2022, with restaurants offering elevated twists on comfort-food classics. That could mean nostalgic foods like meatloaf or mac & cheese but with global flavors, starchy foods like breads and pastas prepared fresh, or simple appetizers and entrées that connect people with the recipes they experimented with and enjoyed during lockdowns.

Food Trends

SUPERPRETZEL® Loaded Soft Pretzel Bites

Ingredients:

- 25 SUPERPRETZEL® Soft Pretzel Bites (Item #3085)
- 1 Cup Shredded Mexican Blend Cheese
- 1 tbsp Butter (melted)
- 6 Slices of Bacon (cooked & chopped)
- 2 Fresh Scallions (chopped)
- 1 Fresh Jalapeno (sliced)
- Drizzle of Cheddar Cheese Sauce
- Sour Cream as desired
- Salt to top pretzels



Instructions:

1. Bake off Pretzel Bites® in a 350° F oven for 3 minutes or until slightly crunchy
2. Remove pretzel bites from oven and allow to cool slightly
3. Toss pretzels in a mixing bowl with melted butter until fully coated
4. Add 1/2 cup of Mexican blend cheese, half of the bacon, and salt to the bowl and toss until distributed evenly
5. Place pretzel bite mixture into an 8" cast iron skillet and bake in oven for 5 minutes
6. Remove skillet from oven and top with remaining bacon and cheese
7. Drizzle cheese sauce over pretzels bites
8. Garnish with scallions, jalapeno's, and sour cream
9. Serve immediately

Recipe and photo courtesy of J&J Snacks



What would your tiered Covid safety plan look like?

We're all suffering from Covid fatigue – and a desire to get back to some semblance of pre-pandemic life. But restaurants are in a tough spot: They will likely be unable to relax pandemic safety policies while local regulations continue to change and the public's concerns about safety rise and fall with the presence of new virus variants. (And for some time still, customers will be taking precautions based on their personal health and vaccination status.) How does a restaurant keep pace with the shifting environment – and keep staff informed about ever-evolving regulations? A recent report in *The Atlantic* about how we might manage the virus going forward may provide some clues. Several experts interviewed for the piece, including an infectious disease physician and global-health expert, anticipate we will adopt a tiered system of response – similar to how we categorize and respond to hurricanes. Rather than flipping a switch – masks or no masks, well-ventilated indoor dining or no indoor dining at all, for example – we can expect gradations. Future approaches will likely include pieces of the safety protocols you have had to adopt over the past two years – with some choice involved in how far a business goes. Going forward, how can you adapt your training procedures to flex with current environmental risks, as well as to concerns of employees and customers? Consider how you can provide just-in-time updates to trainees by packaging and delivering the content in new ways.



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Your cleaning products need to multitask too

Restaurants are having to do more with less, make training new staff as straightforward as possible, and uphold safety protocols – so where any processes can be made easier, why not make a change? Cleaning products are one example. They should be simple to use. Can your cleaning products be used in a variety of applications and locations across your restaurant? The food safety company Ecolab advises restaurants to make the cleaning process less complex by using multifunctional cleansers specifically designed to require fewer steps, less time and less dependency on certain temperatures.



Foodservice Updates

Tap into the freedom of plant-based dishes

From the plant-based chicken nuggets increasingly available at quick-service brands up to the sushi-grade vegan calamari coming to market, new plant-based foods are flooding restaurant menus. According to the Rethinking Meatless report by taste and nutrition company Kerry, plant-based menu items have skyrocketed 800 percent over four years. As the options have gotten tastier and gone mainstream, even carnivores are enjoying them: A 2021 survey from the market research firm Piplsay found that of 30,700 people polled, 71 percent said they had heard of plant-based meat substitutes at quick-service restaurants. Of those, 54 percent had tried the alternatives – 72 percent of whom identified as meat eaters. Plant-based options on restaurant menus are likely to expand even further. The Impossible company alone launched a record number of products in late 2021, including plant-based sausage, chicken nuggets, pork and meatballs. But even if you don't offer these particular items on your menu, consumers' desire for plant-based food takes the pressure off of restaurant brands to offer a particular animal protein – and that's a great thing when inflation is high and supplies are uncertain. At a time when a restaurant customer happily orders an Impossible burger or one made from quinoa or black beans or lentils or vegetables, there is room for chefs to innovate – and to make creative substitutions based on what ingredients happen to be available and affordable at a given time.



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