

Restaurant Marketing Strategies for Slow Times





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Introduction

Every restaurant has a slow period.

You know better than anyone how challenging it can be to have a full staff and plenty of food but an empty dining room—even just for an hour. Your restaurant's profitability largely depends on a steady stream of customers, and maintaining that steady stream comes down to more than just flipping your sign to open and unlocking the doors.

Figuring out new ways to deal with slow periods is a big part of what it means to be a successful restaurant owner. Your team looks to you to direct their efforts. If you're a manager, the owner looks to you to increase their bottom line. But identifying profitable ideas that organically build on your existing brand isn't always easy.

You never want to expand with new opportunities at the expense of your core business — or the relationship with your

solid customer base. Finding a way to grow your customer base and not simply shift it to a larger pool temporarily, respects your hard work and success to date. And it will help you maintain trust with your existing diners and staff, too.

With that in mind, we have assembled five tactics restaurant managers can use to expand your profits during slow periods — and thoughts on how to implement each one without undercutting your existing business.

Let's begin with the easiest to implement of all: a **seasonal limited time offer (LTO)**.



Chapter

Seasonal LTOs

One of the easiest ways to introduce something new to your restaurant's normal operation is the LTO — the limited time offer. Controlled in its scope, a successful LTO can be anything from a single dish to a full, additional menu, so long as it feels unique and fleeting. It's not enough to just conceive of a new dish. You have to develop a sense of urgency.

That FOMO ("fear of missing out") your customer feels can be developed through advertising, whether external (signage, ads, window posters) or internal (upselling by staff, table tents, menu inserts). Without that extra effort, your LTO is just another menu item that could easily be overlooked.

Your LTO can be a discount opportunity, but it doesn't have to be. Simply offering

something that incorporates a new seasonal ingredient or combines two things your customers haven't seen on your menu before can generate enough interest for a successful LTO.

In fact, 59 percent of consumers say they're more likely to purchase an item on a restaurant menu if it's described as "seasonal." 49 percent also said "seasonal" menu items are more appetizing, and another 39 percent believe "seasonal" dishes are healthier.¹

It makes sense that natural, locally-sourced ingredients and sustainability are skyrocketing in popularity in both the full-service and limited-service segments. Given the limited availability of these ingredients, restaurant owners and operators are able to

build some level of seasonality and flexibility into their menus, emphasizing that urgency of a limited time offer.

So, what's the best way to manage these additions to your restaurant repertoire?

Promoting Your Menu

Build up anticipation for your new menu item with a series of teasers posted across all your social media platforms. Then, when you make the big release announcement, include links to and pictures of your new dishes or menu with every post.

Throughout the season, continue to post photos of your seasonal menu items to promote LTOs. And, as the season winds down, boost interest in these items with a "get it before it's gone" message — while still building buzz for your next new LTO.

as gamier proteins like lamb, duck, and mussels. But that's not all.

Other fall dishes like curry pumpkin bisque, pumpkin tortellini, and even pumpkin mac and cheese capitalize not just on this particular squash's overwhelming availability, but also the public's fascination with its taste. In fact, pumpkin is appearing



on 162 percent more appetizer menus, 92 percent more entrée menus, and 53 percent more menus overall, compared with 4 years ago.²

And be sure to experiment with all the ways you use these short term ingredients across several dishes. Not only does this tie together your menu, it also helps reduce waste and keeps your operations more sustainable — in turn lowering food costs and further increasing your profit.

Post photos of your seasonal menu items to promote LTOs.

To make your dishes stand apart from your competitors' offerings, investigate the availability of ingredients during each season, factoring in your geographic area and access to local sources. For example, fall brings a variety of rich produce like beets, Brussels sprouts, and pomegranate, as well

Preparing Your Staff

Your back-of-house team obviously needs to be aware of menu changes so they can execute the new dishes properly, but don't forget to train your front-of-house staff — especially servers — on the updates, as well. The best way to get everyone on board, and sprinkle in some team building, is by hosting an all-employee tasting.

As the front-line marketers for your menu, your servers need to know every detail about the new dishes they'll be recommending to your customers. While your servers are trying the dishes, be sure to describe each item in the way that can be used with a customer, so each staff member can respond appropriately when a diner asks what a dish is like or requests a personal recommendation.

This is a critical step in making your LTO a big success. Signs and social media posts can draw people in, but your server's pitch for the menu item is what will make it a success.



Finally, whenever you shift your restaurant menu to focus on seasonality, consider the impact frequent updates (and these fresh, local ingredients) will have on your back-of-house equipment and kitchen design. You may need to switch between simmering stews in the winter and chilling ceviche in the summer, so prepare your kitchen staff to handle these operational shifts with the right procedures and equipment.

Since local, fresh ingredients may have a shorter shelf life and higher cost, they also need to be optimized to their full use to balance the added expense. If you find that certain seasonal ingredients take longer prep time, make sure your kitchen crew is trained on how to handle these ingredients efficiently.

To optimize production, you may also need to reorganize the layout of certain stations. This is going to be a big adjustment for your staff, so be sure to build in ample practice time for them to get used to the new set-up.

Ultimately, looking at your operations with a year-round perspective — while keeping in mind the day-to-day details — will keep everything running smoothly season after season. Get your team into the habit of managing specials, and you'll be able to run LTOs on a regular basis in no time.

Next, we take a look at one of the largest underserved (and most profitable) clientele for most restaurants: **the business diner.**

The Business Diner

It doesn't matter if you're in a large metro area or a small town, there are businesses in or nearby your area. And where there are businesses, there are businesspeople looking for places to take clients, new colleagues, potential partners, and any other person they want to impress and persuade.

And they're bringing a lot more than just their business contacts to the table.

On average, business diners spend **2 to 3 times** more than their casual dining counterparts — and plan their restaurant visits much differently.³

For instance, business diners frequently must plan on short timelines. And in many cases, business diners are unaware of or don't have specifics on their travel plans until only days prior to their trip.

Considering that these diners typically travel in larger groups than other casual diners — often including as many as six, eight, or 10 people — this short timeline puts even more stress on both the individual requesting the reservation, and the restaurateur looking to accommodate the party.

So how can you make it work — and make a profit along the way?

Accommodating Short Notice Reservations

Train your front of house staff to spot certain clues that the person on the phone may be a business diner — or, more likely, an executive assistant — looking to make a reservation for a meeting.

Some tip-offs include when someone is making a reservation for a large party under another individual's name, often with a short lead-time. Or when someone calls from another area of the country, or requests details about your location relevant to the business district or nearby hotels.

When your front of house staff hears these tip-offs — or any time they think a special occasion may be associated with the reservation — they should inquire about special needs of the party, including dietary restrictions or other requests. Write down as much of this type of information about each business diner as possible, and use it at every opportunity.

And if you notice an increase in business diners coming to your location, save a few tables rather than filling to capacity. That way, you'll never have to refuse a large group that may come in to spontaneously celebrate after a deal has been closed.

Accommodating the Need for Privacy

The experience this type of customer has at your table is, in many ways, as much a part of their pitch, celebration, or discussion as anything else. That's why business diners also tend to be extremely loyal to specific locations. Once they locate a restaurant that caters to these unique needs, they're extremely likely to return, even if — and sometimes especially when — they're not from the area.

Although a suite of private party rooms catering to groups of six is the ideal situation for these diners, business-friendly areas can include anything from a group of large, round tables to a few small, easily-moveable tables set in a quiet corner. Having extra tables and chairs on hand that can easily be reconfigured means you'll always be able to create an appropriately sized table for even the largest parties. You just want to ensure close colleagues can feel comfortable having a conversation.



Even if you don't have a party room, you can create the illusion of more privacy by using comfortable, tall-backed chairs; organizing a few tables into tiny nooks that may not be living up to their full potential; or even using décor, such as by strategically placing decorative screens between tables or different seating areas.

Accommodating Diverse Tastes

One particular facet of the business lunch is the need to satisfy requirements and expectations of different cultures within one meal and one interaction. An American businessperson may be entertaining colleagues from anywhere in the world. It's important that no matter what culture these guests hail from, they feel comfortable with the experience — but there may be some potential pitfalls lurking in your menu that you hadn't even considered.



Take, for example, an appetizer. You may serve five individual pieces in a single order, and for the casual lunch-goer, this is typically sufficient. But what about the business diner who is entertaining six or seven colleagues, some of whom may come from a culture that considers sharing pieces of food or from the same plate improper — or who may think sharing is just awkward for such a formal occasion?

Show your business diners that you have their needs in mind by preemptively offering the appetizer at a size that will satisfy the

number of guests in their party — for a slightly different price. A specific business lunch menu, so to speak.

Or, if you have been given sufficient notice, create a shorter, but still equally impressive, prix fixe menu specifically for that party. This will not only ensure that each item is tailored specifically to each individual's cultural and business needs, but also allow the host to know exactly how much they're spending from the get-go — without having to take the step of asking how much each item is, or adding it up as he or she goes.

Showing Your Appreciation

Once you've established yourself as the go-to restaurant for business lunches, maintain these relationships. Take time to contact that businessperson or their staff to thank them for dining with you, and always extend the invitation to return.

Remember to document the names and needs dictated by executive assistants when they call. These are often the true decision-makers when it comes to choosing the restaurant — and they're typically just as busy as their boss! If they know that one location not only satisfies their needs, but also surpasses their expectations — and can always offer a reservation — they'll come back time and time again. And they just might tell a few other folks in the business about their great find!

Another great way to draw in the business crowd is to provide them with exactly what they need after a long day of work. Yep, you guessed it. It's time for **Happy Hour**.



Chapter

Happy Hour

Happy Hour has long been considered one of the most recognizable ways to draw in more customers in the post-lunch, pre-dinner lull of early evening. Offering drink specials alone can definitely be a draw for your regular customers, but it also might tickle the fancy of an entirely different set of diners.

And it's no wonder: 77 percent of adults, including a whopping 85 percent of millennials, surveyed said they would visit a bar or restaurant during off-peak hours if they received a discount.⁴

Unfortunately, many restaurateurs find that in order to compete in their area, they must lower prices to an unprofitable level. Offering additional deals, upselling, and using your ingredients wisely can help

ensure that even these low-cost specials bring in their fair share of dough.

Choosing Your Specials Wisely

Happy Hour patrons are accustomed to having a limited menu of deals — so don't hesitate to carefully curate a list of items that already have high profit margins and can withstand a price decrease without losing too much of their profitability. You can even feature items using overstock materials you're looking to unload.

In this case, house-made cocktails — including upscale ingredients left over from your menu — often fit this need perfectly. Instead of costly mixers, you're using only materials you already have — and, in

many cases, leftover ingredients you may otherwise toss. Not to mention, a truly well crafted house-made cocktail carries a special appeal for guests — and will seem like an even better deal than the more costly beer or soda and liquor cocktails Happy Hour patrons most commonly see.

Upselling

Nearly every Happy Hour patron comes specifically for the special deal you're offering on your cocktails, beer, or wine. But that doesn't mean that they won't pay slightly more for better ingredients.



Instead of just offering a well special, also offer your guests the choice of using premium liquor, or selecting a more expensive wine or beer, for only \$1 or \$2 more, depending on your current pricing structure. It may seem like a small change — in fact, you're counting on your guests agreeing that it's a small price to pay — but each additional dollar will definitely add up.

In many cases, just offering drink specials may be enough. But to really make your Happy Hour its most profitable, adding a short list of special, snackable items is key.



Explore your appetizer menu and identify which items could be offered in servings of two or three instead of the typical amount, or that could be scaled down for parties of one or two. You can then offer these items with standalone special prices, or with drinks as a two-for-one special.

If the guest is already having the cocktail, it will seem only natural to get the special food item for just a fraction more — not to mention, snacking on your tasty appetizers might just encourage them to stay for the dinner rush.

But what about if your restaurant is located somewhere — like Massachusetts, Maine, Delaware, and Alaska — that bans Happy Hours or other variations on alcohol specials?

Just because your state doesn't allow low-cost, high-volume drink specials doesn't mean you have to miss out on all the potential profits that can be made during Happy Hour. Just be creative in the specials you do offer — and give your guests some fun incentives to keep returning after work.

Just because you can only offer specials on food doesn't mean you can't layer on other limited time offers to up those feelings of urgency in your guests. Experiment with special Happy Hour dishes that can only be purchased during that time period — or that are only available on certain days.

These specials can be variations on your current offerings using ingredients you already have on hand, or can be entirely new concoctions developed by your chef. Either way, train your staff to consistently remind guests that these food items are only available during Happy Hour, encouraging them to consistently return during those off-peak hours.

Tying It to an Event

If you find food isn't enough to drive your Happy Hour profits, try offering another entertainment option. Some, such as karaoke, require additional equipment. Many other offerings, however, can be offered cheaply, and still drive engagement during these slower periods.

Try collecting a few board or card games that guests can play while they're unwinding after work, or invest in a tabletop system that they can use to access the internet or play other games. Or offer trivia — a popular bar staple — developed with the questions from an old copy of Trivial Pursuit or sourced from the Internet. You may just find that many guests will start coming for the activity rather than the specials — and, if they're engaged in a game, will stay even longer than you anticipated.



If you find food isn't enough to drive your Happy Hour profits, try offering another entertainment option.



Offering Drink Alternatives

Not being able to offer specials on liquor doesn't necessarily have to prevent you from offering your guests an extra-special drink at an extra-special price during Happy Hour. "Mocktails" and other refreshing non-alcoholic beverages are increasing in popularity, and can provide your guests the same experience as a cocktail at a fraction of the price.

Try mixing up an herbal lemonade, fruity agua fresca, or another special concoction using leftover ingredients from your menu. Not only will nondrinkers rejoice at the opportunity to have a special drink outside the water and soda realm, you'll also use up those extra materials that would otherwise be thrown away.

But if you're looking to go the extra mile in terms of menu — and want to boost your chef's creativity as much as profits — *a **tasting menu*** might just be the thing to explore. Read on as we go through the do's and don'ts.



Chapter

A Tasting Menu

Whether proposed as an extravagant dining experience or just an opportunity to showcase your restaurant, adding a tasting menu to your repertoire isn't just an attempt to gain critics' attention.

Guests also see tasting menus as a more elevated offering that they're willing to splurge on, an opportunity for a deeper connection with the chef, and a memorable dining experience overall.

While it generally makes more sense for fine dining establishments than family restaurants, a tasting menu can be a worthy investment to improve your restaurant margins, if it fits your brand and your business objectives. But the higher price tag of a tasting menu means that adding one requires careful planning and strategy to translate into profit.

Showcasing Your Kitchen Talent and Ingredients

A tasting menu is a prime opportunity to demonstrate your team's culinary expertise and the innovation that sets your restaurant apart from your competition. In the execution of tasting menus, your team needs to demonstrate a higher skill level required for these more technically advanced dishes, precise plating, and careful timing.

Focusing on a set menu of smaller plates requires your chefs to flex their creative muscles to develop a multi-course culinary experience. The menu's structure also allows chefs to use more unique and prized ingredients (like truffles or saffron) that would otherwise be expensive for entrees

but can be included more thoughtfully in smaller portions on tasting menus.

Customers who would shell out the extra cash for a tasting menu are looking for an extra special experience, possibly celebrating a birthday, anniversary, or another life event. Make sure that everyone on your team, from the back to the front of house, is fully dedicated to making each guest's tasting menu experience a memorable one.



There are also factors outside your restaurant that could influence the dining occasion. If your restaurant is located in a theater district, your guests may want to make restaurant reservations in conjunction with their tickets to a show. For these occasions, a longer tasting menu might not fit the customers' needs.

Not Overfeeding Your Customers

With a 10- or 12-course menu, there is a risk that your guests could leave your restaurant feeling bloated rather than pleasantly

satisfied. Even a four-course menu could be too filling if the portions are too large or every dish is too rich.

Tasting menu courses have inherently small portions, but heartier flavors can fill you up fast. If your guests are too full halfway through the tasting menu, you could end up with wasted ingredients — not to mention dissatisfied customers, who felt like they didn't get their money's worth because they couldn't finish every course. Consider balancing the menu with some lighter courses to cleanse your guests' palates and prevent overindulgence.

If you offer wine pairings with the menu, be sure to factor this into the potential to overindulge. Just as you control portion size in your dishes, make sure you are controlling the volume of each wine selection.



Ensuring Your Servers Are Attentive and Knowledgeable

Customers who order a tasting menu are expecting an elevated level of service along with their refined courses. A tasting menu is a special occasion, so extra care needs to be included when your guests are choosing to celebrate with your restaurant.



Before a new course is served, the previous course needs to be completely cleared and fresh table settings must be brought. Each course should be presented with a full description of what's on the plate. This information may have been included on the menu, but it's likely that guests will forget the details a few courses in.

In addition to describing the dish, your servers also need to express the story that the chef wants to share with the menu. They are your guests' guide through this special dining experience, so how your servers present each course will prime your guests' taste buds and set the right expectations.

While attentive service is key for tasting menus, there's a line between letting the guest get a complete tasting menu experience and dragging the meal out for hours. From an operational perspective, the longer a tasting menu experience, the less table turns you could have in a night's service, which in the extreme decreases the potential boost to your profit margin.

In terms of customer satisfaction and increasing customer loyalty, if courses are paced unevenly or too long, your customers could be fighting your staff from clearing the plates before they've finished — or left twiddling their thumbs waiting for the next course to arrive. Both situations can leave a sour taste from an otherwise delicious meal.

Your front and back of house teams will need to be completely in sync on the execution of a tasting menu to get the timing down just right so your guests will want to return for more memorable meals.





Continually Updating Your Menu

The vision of a tasting menu lies with the chef, but you still need to carefully evaluate the ROI (return on investment) of your tasting menu and factor in seasonality. By presenting and clearing the same plates for each course, your servers can provide valuable feedback on your tasting menu.

Is there a point in the meal when the guests stop finishing their dishes? This could indicate a need to cut down portions or replace an early course with a lighter alternative. Do your guests rave to your servers about your amuse bouche? The success of this first bite could inspire the chef to build a new tasting menu around this taste.

And if you find smaller portion menus isn't the way to go for your restaurant's extra boost of profit during downtime, maybe the opposite is worth consideration. Group menus can be very profitable — if you and your team are set up to accommodate the burden.

In our final chapter, we'll take you through the ins and outs of **parties and catering** for profit.



Chapter

Parties and Catering

One surefire way to increase your restaurant sales without disturbing your core customer experience is to host larger parties at your restaurant, in a separate designated room — or even offsite through catering events. This is a particularly good tactic for those summer months of “dads and grads” where regular traffic may start to ease off.

Private parties can be offered a limited service menu to order from, helping your kitchen control costs and limit being overtaxed with too many different orders that need to arrive simultaneously. Since parties and other catered events are typically booked in advance, your chef will have advance warning about the amount of food they’ll need to stock and prepare, limiting unnecessary waste.

And hosting large parties in your own enclosed space can help control staffing as well. Buffet or family-style serving limits the number of servers necessary to keep these important guests happy. As larger parties tend to be faster to manage than multiple tables of the same total number of guests, you’ll be able to handle more guests over the course of an evening shift.

This is also your opportunity to serve guests who may never have been exposed to your restaurant — guests that now have insight into what you can offer in a full-service setting. Those word of mouth recommendations from party-goers can be very positive for your reputation overall, and it’s easy to see how party-goers can turn into regular customers as well.

Prepping Your Party Room

Where do you think guests would prefer to hold their holiday celebrations, bridal showers, corporate events, and civic meetings: A large table surrounded by other guests, clanking silverware, and rushing servers; or a quiet area with dedicated servers, décor, and dishes?



At first glance, it may seem easier — and more cost-effective — to simply put large parties at their own table tucked away from the action. But by using (or building out) a special space, you're doing much more than accommodating groups of 8 or 10 — you're creating an entirely new, and very lucrative, facet to your business. And it typically requires fewer servers to satisfy a large group sitting together than an equal number of people, separated into several tables.

Although they may see your private party spaces, it may not occur to your guests that your restaurant would be the prime spot for their event. That's why you have to get the word out — and the best way to do so is to go straight to the source.

Contact party planners, wedding dress boutiques, and other event vendors in your area to ask them to help promote your services. Visit local sports teams or organizations and encourage them to hold meetings, celebrations, or award ceremonies with you. You can even contact hotels and tour companies in the area to get the word out that large groups are welcome in your event spaces.

And, as more and more people plan parties through Facebook and share their photos on Instagram, don't forget to broadcast your message on social media.



Making the Menu

Although smaller parties can typically order from your everyday menu, you will want to consider special, limited-service menus for any large groups. Meet with your chef and determine which dishes would not only present well to these groups, but can also be prepared and served in a large scale without over-taxing your kitchen — an especially important consideration if you intend to have normal service hours in your public dining room during the party.

If you and your kitchen staff are comfortable with experimenting, you can even develop multiple menus to offer to party organizers, based on the type of event they're hosting. For larger gatherings, you may want to consider a buffet-style meal, putting less strain on every member of your staff and allowing your guests to help themselves — and even go back for seconds.

Be aware: there are likely more than a few items on your current menu that cannot withstand pre-prep, transport, and reheating required for an offsite catering venue. That's why it's important to develop a catering-specific menu full of dishes that are perfectly suited to large-scale production and transport.

It's important to also get a feel for the demand in your market. Are you located near an office park, where sandwiches, soup, or warm comfort classics could play well at lunch time? Are you in a residential area, where formal events like bridal showers or large-scale parties like family reunions may make up most of your business?

Leaving Your Space

Although the basics of table service remain the same as in your own dining room, catering comes with an entirely different set of issues for servers. The biggest challenge? Dealing with an unfamiliar environment — and customers who may behave much differently than they would in a restaurant.



Case in point: Many customers would hesitate to walk from table to table in a restaurant, greeting other patrons. But at a wedding, this behavior is downright expected from the bride and groom — not to mention the guests, who are enthusiastic about seeing all of their friends and family.

Equipment is potentially the costliest aspect of starting up a catering service. Top of any must-have list is a reliable vehicle (or more than one, depending on the scope of your business) large enough to handle the volume you expect to transport — plus

the materials needed to safely carry that food to its final destination and prepare it once it arrives.

Because they are for commercial use, each vehicle you purchase will also have to be licensed for this purpose. You'll also need a staff member with a commercial driver's license and experience handling these operations.

To transport everything from your site to the event space, you will need carts, food and beverage carriers, and storage for the wide array of utensils you'll need for prep. But that's just the beginning. If you are offering full banquets, you may also need to invest in:

- Dinnerware, chairs, linens, and banquet tables, either purchased or rented
- Food pan or banquet holding cabinets
- Portable catering and cooking equipment, such as commercial induction ranges, hand sinks, and cold food tables
- Buffet serving materials, including serving trays, beverage dispensers, and chafing dishes

That said, with the proper set-up, catering and in-house parties can be profitable at a margin much higher than your typical dining room service — and help fill the financial gap when the slow months cycle through.



Catering and in-house parties **can be profitable at a much higher margin** than your typical dining room service.



Conclusion

There are only so many ways to increase your sales.

Each one of the five ways to market during slow times that we've looked at — *seasonal LTOs, business lunch, Happy Hour, tasting menus, and party services* — can drive in new business and keep it coming back again and again. If you keep a close eye on expenses and the bottom line, each one also has the potential to drive profit through greater per-person spend, as well.

Ultimately, no matter what marketing tactics you use during slow times in your restaurant's week, month, or year, they should all fall under one of the following core strategies to increase your sales:

- Attract new customers
- Encourage repeat visits
- Increase customer spend
- Speed up table turns

How you accomplish any of the above will require creativity, hard work, and above all else, planning.

However, using table turns to increase your sales really depends on quality training and organization for your staff. The stronger your formal process for educating new employees — and continuing that education on an ongoing basis through staff meetings and setting expectations — the better your team will be at helping you secure customers during historically slow times.

And don't be afraid to try something new — just do so with a plan in place that maximizes your resources. Investigate short-term funding if you need an immediate outlay of cash to develop any of these tactics. It will not only give you the boost you need to start drawing in more customers, but if you choose the right program, you could also have cash in hand AND an influx of new customers right out of the gate.

Endnotes

¹“Making the most of the seasons” – Restaurant-hospitality.com

²“Autumn flavors move from sweet to savory dishes” – Nations Restaurant News; nrn.com

³“New Analysis from Concur and Table8 Shows Business Dining Is A Key Contributor To Rising Restaurant Revenue” – Concur.com

⁴“Happy hour and late night success” – Restaurant.org



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