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Get Your Restaurant Ready for Summer on a Budget



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Introduction

Plan Ahead for the Summertime Rush

As spring transitions to summer, people tend to head outdoors to soak up as much warm weather as they can before the chill of winter returns. The change of seasons not only impacts wardrobes and moods, but businesses as well. The restaurant industry in particular often feels the effects of this shift. With more potential customers eager to spend time dining out, restaurant owners have the opportunity to significantly bulk up their bank account before the winter doldrums set back in.

As a restaurant owner, you should take advantage of these slower times in late winter and early spring to get your summertime game plan mapped out.

Here are 10 steps you can take to bolster your success in the summer months without breaking the bank.



Chapter

Create A Power Patio

An outdoor seating area is the key to winning the summertime dining game, but some owners may balk at the cost of creating a patio from scratch. However, curating a well-defined outdoor space that enhances your restaurant's already-killer atmosphere doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg.

When outfitting your patio, search for on-trend refurbished and vintage pieces such as reclaimed wood picnic tables, benches, and chairs. Be sure to also purchase umbrellas for your shade-loving patrons. Or even better, score them for free. Liquor and beer distributors are often happy to supply branded umbrellas in exchange for the publicity and continued business with your restaurant.

Lighting is king when it comes to a stellar alfresco dining experience. Solar-powered and water-resistant twinkle lights are a cost-effective option that create the perfect ambiance for your guests.

Next, you'll want to start thinking about affordable outdoor décor. When choosing pieces, keep in mind that your patio should feel like an extension of your interior space. Budget-friendly pieces can include:

- Mason jars filled with flower clippings.
- Lanterns with citronella candles that pull double-duty, looking chic and repelling unwanted mosquitoes.
- Metal pails to hold all the silverware, napkins, condiments, etc.

- Mismatched tableware is in — pick up some eclectic dishes at your local thrift shop.
- Install easy screw-in hooks underneath your tables to hang jackets and purses.

Plants are an affordable way to spruce up your patio by bringing some life (literally and figuratively) to the space. Look for greenery that's hardy and low-maintenance. A few to consider include:

- **Croton.** Their leathery, colorful leaves thrive in full sun with moderate watering.
- **Herbs.** Basil, mint, thyme, and oregano can all be planted in simple pots. They'll look great and are practical, since you can incorporate their flavors into your restaurant's summer drinks and dishes.
- **Marigolds.** This bright orange flower is not only low-maintenance, but also has insect-repelling properties.
- **Ferns.** These lush green plants are excellent for those shady spots.

Weather can be unpredictable, so always have a plan in place for last-minute forecast changes. This includes creating a protocol for staff to follow should the skies open up and they need to herd guests quickly and safely inside to continue their meals.



Plants are an affordable way to spruce up your patio by bringing some life (literally and figuratively) to the space.

Cater to Your Canine Customers

People love bringing their four-legged friends to dine with them in the summer. If your local laws allow dogs in outdoor spaces, you might want to consider making your patio dog-friendly. Here's a few things to consider before you invite your guests to bring along their furry friends:

- Have treats and multiple water bowls available for your doggy diners to take advantage of while their humans are enjoying a meal out.
- Those under-the-table purse/coat hooks can also function as a great spot for patrons to tie up their pooch's leash.
- Be sure that pet owners understand that it's their responsibility to clean up after

their dog and to keep an eye on them at all times. Post a sign in the patio that explains the rules for your "paw-some" guests.

- As a final touch, include at least one canine-focused cuisine item on your menu, such as a peanut butter-based ice cream treat, brown rice and beef burger, or scrambled eggs and bacon bowl. Develop menu items that can be created from inexpensive ingredients you already regularly purchase so as to not add additional costs.

Check out [Catering to the Canine Lovers: Allowing Dogs on Restaurant Patios](#) for even more innovative and inspirational pup-friendly dining ideas.



Chapter

Get Seasonal with It

Reports show that 31 percent of restaurant owners update their menu on a monthly basis, while 24 percent do so seasonally. The summer months are a great time to add and test out seasonal items on your food and drink menus. Look ahead at trend forecasts for what ingredients are going to be the next big thing this summer and think of innovative ways to incorporate them into your fare.

Try adding a boozy frozen drink option on your summer menu, because who doesn't like cooling off with a frozen margarita, piña colada, or daiquiri? Concoct a summer-themed sangria or other non-frozen fresh cocktail for those patrons prone to brain freezes.

Don't forget about your patrons who prefer non-alcoholic drinks. Create summer-inspired lemonades and teas that incorporate frozen fruit, fresh herbs, and other seasonal ingredients you have on hand. These refreshing beverages are great for adults and kids and a nice surprise for guests accustomed to only seeing non-alcoholic options like soda or juice.

Now that your drink game is strong, what about the food? When it comes to summer cuisine, diners often want to go all in, especially in cities where summer only lasts a few months. This means embracing fresh fruits and veggies, shareable apps that feature crowd-pleasing dips like guacamole, hummus, and salsa, along with grill-worthy staples like burgers, chicken, char dogs, and steaks. Try teaming up with a local farm to supply your customers with garden-fresh produce during these summer months.

Now, for your littlest guests you'll want to include elevated summer favorites that are kid-friendly, and parent-approved, such as mini-grilled sliders, char-grilled chicken strips, and grilled sweet corn. And no kid menu (or adult menu for that matter) is complete without a few mouthwatering dessert options like fresh fruit popsicles, ice cream sandwiches, and Italian ice.





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Play Your Wild Card

Allow your establishment to stand out by including some type of X factor that no other neighboring restaurant can lay claim to.

Outdoor games on the patio are becoming a diner favorite. Build your own bags/cornhole boards that feature your branding, snag a jumbo-sized Jenga, a couple of dartboards, and maybe even a used ping pong table you repainted, and set it all up in a secluded corner of the patio.

If you can, buy or rent a projector to display major sports games. Having TVs or a projector outside, even if it's only once a week, can encourage sports-crazed patrons to show up and eat, drink, and watch their favorite team in action for hours on end.

Even though the summer months are all about turning up the heat, let's not forget that it can still get a little chilly at night. Have a few fire pits, along with heat lamps, around your outdoor area to keep customers comfortable well into the night. Try to purchase these items in the off season or from secondhand stores to get the best deals. You can even offer a s'mores kit on your seasonal menu so guests of all ages can get cozy around the fire and roast some marshmallows for dessert.

Save the Date

Another way to draw a crowd is by scheduling a variety of summertime events. Try piggybacking off of an already-established local event, while also partnering with local businesses, bands, and groups to keep costs low and the buzz high.

Some event ideas to consider include:

- Live music
- Open-mic nights
- Trivia
- DJ sets
- Private business events and parties
- Charity events and fundraisers
- Wine and food tastings
- Networking events
- Themed movie nights
- Party packages
- Holiday celebrations
- New food/drink launches

By establishing your restaurant as more than just a place to eat and drink you can put your place on guests' radars for their next big event, while fostering tight-knit relationships with nearby businesses.



Chapter

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Staff Up for the Season

Begin your seasonal hiring process three to four months before the summer season to ensure that your customer service standards don't take a hit.

When creating staff schedules, strive to create a balance so each shift includes a mix of seasoned employees and seasonal hires. This will ensure that the new folks can lean on your veteran employees as they learn the ropes, and customers won't experience a dip in service.

You should also take into account that some staff members may request time off during the summer months, while others may be looking to pick up extra shifts. Talk to staff

about both so that you can give valued employees time to relax and recharge, while allowing others the opportunities to build up their bank account with extra shifts.

You know better than anyone that one of the first steps to keeping your patrons happy is keeping your staff happy. If your people feel taken care of, listened to, and equipped to succeed they will be more motivated to give their best effort, leading to more positive guest experiences.



Chapter

Invest in Nimble Tech

Keep your customers' experience as convenient as possible by investing in technology that empowers your servers to be agile and efficient. Handheld POS systems allow your staff to split checks, swipe multiple credit cards, and send orders to the kitchen/bar from the palm of their hand.

These fully integrated systems can also show inventory information in real time, custom floorplans, and a variety of sales and shift reports. They're even able to call out allergen info for specific menu items and manage all promotional hours/items with the click of a button (or swipe of a finger).

This is especially clutch on those days where you have a packed house both inside and on the patio with multiple large groups and a 10-top that wants separate checks. Your guests can pay, sign, and tip right at the table so they're not left waiting to flag down their server for the check.

Among restaurant owners, 46 percent say that server handheld tablets **improve their guest experience**. These devices can fuel your servers' ability to turn tables faster, while giving guests the most enjoyable and seamless experience possible.



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Bring the Outside Inside

While your patio will no doubt be packed for much of the summer, not all guests at your restaurant will want to dine outside. But that doesn't mean they don't still want to experience a little summer fun. Bring some of the vibrant outdoor energy from your patio area inside your dining room with summer-infused décor.

You can breathe some life into your indoor seating space by using any leftover plants and greenery elements you purchased for the patio. Working with local farmers and florists is a budget-friendly way to source assorted flower bouquets that you can divide up and place in mason jars or vases around the bar and tables.

Keep your tableware light and bright using clear glasses and white linens with pops of color on the tables to add a summertime vibe.



Chapter

Spread the Word

Promoting your restaurant through different marketing channels can boost awareness of your unique summertime offerings and draw more first-time and repeat customers in the door. One of the most effective ways to spread the word is through social media.

Think about the kind of content you'll want to share, and when. Next, create a social media posting calendar outlining your posting schedule. Sprinkle in scheduled content such as new menu items, summer promotions, and event reminders along with more real-time content like guests enjoying a night out on your patio with their pooches. Always include applicable hashtags and your restaurant location so that your posts appear in searches.

While smartphone photos can be impressively crisp and clear, it's still

worthwhile to invest in a professional shoot that shows off your restaurant's interior, exterior, and food/drinks. Reach out to photography students and newly established photography businesses for the best rates.

Photos are great for social media, but videos are even better and have been proven to garner more eyeballs and engagement. Take short videos of your employees, chefs, and restaurant in action to entice viewers to visit.

It's easy to get overwhelmed, but don't feel like you need to set aside hours each day to capture this content. There are some great tools out there that allow you to plan and schedule the bulk of your social posts ahead of time.



Stop and Stare

Never underestimate the power of a few pieces of simple signage. Try to find unexpected ways to grab the attention of people walking past your restaurant during those long summer days (and nights). Locals might not even be aware that you have a patio, so make sure you have a few prominent sidewalk and window signs touting this all-important summer feature. Keep signs concise. Highlight the most enticing elements you want to promote, like outdoor seating, a rooftop patio, food/drink specials, live music, etc.

Many restaurants have been successful by getting a little cheeky with their signage, featuring Instagram-worthy quotes and

sayings that draw the eyes and laughs of passersby, often successfully drawing them inside.

There's no need to limit your wit to sidewalk signage. Dream up a focal wall inside and/or outside that is too eye-catching for people to pass up the chance to stop, snap, and share a photo (tagging your restaurant, of course).

Paint a mural on the side of your establishment's wall that features a scene or fun element that guests can pose next to, like this San Francisco restaurant's **upside-down champagne bottle**.

Or, challenge your most-creative in-house wordsmith to craft a bold saying that encapsulates your restaurant's vibe and make it come to life with a **neon sign** that's sure to drive the influencers wild.

Your signage should always have the goal of inviting people in, both emotionally and physically, to experience all that your restaurant has to offer — a welcoming atmosphere, awesome food and drinks, and the promise of a great time with friends and family.





“When we expanded our restaurant, Rewards Network helped me buy new equipment, chairs, tables, stoves, and made my business succeed.”

— David Dashi
Amichi's Italian Restaurant, Melbourne, FL

Want to learn more about how Rewards Network can help your restaurant grow?

Contact us today:

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