



Marketing your Restaurant in Economic Downturn

We have to admit: there are some restaurants that won't survive the next 12 months. Tourist numbers are down, local consumers are eating out less and they are more discerning about how they spend their money.

**“When the rate of external change exceeds the rate of internal change,
the end of your business is in sight...”**

What internal changes are you making? What can you do to make a difference?

Let's start by asking 'What *is* your **point of difference**'? What makes you unique from any other restaurant? If you can't identify your **unique selling proposition** (USP) then find one!

A 'USP' is something that makes your customer say '**WOW**'. It is something that is out of proportion to make them remember and to tell others. It makes you stand out.

Here are some things to consider:-

Service

Now there's a USP. I am sorry but a high percentage of service in this region leaves a lot to be desired. ...and yes I know that you probably rely on backpackers. But is that a good enough excuse? If you can't find and keep good long term staff, then you need to have an in depth look at the culture of your business created by your management style.

Having razor sharp service that wraps an experience around your food and beverage product, will make people come back time and time again. In our relaxed tropical region it is appropriate for service to be a little more casual, without however compromising professionalism. Allow some fun into your service and involve the customer.

Good service starts with a **good supervisor**. One who is highly motivated, really knows their stuff, is a good mentor and has an eye for detail. ...and yes they are hard to find also. Quiet times are ideal for training. An **investment in training** can motivate your staff and in some cases you may be eligible for government incentives to cover the cost. The questions 'What if I train them and they leave? What if I don't train them and they stay?' Makes you think about the intangible and irrecoverable damage and expense that can occur with an inexperienced supervisor.

High turnover of staff is a major cost that is again intangible. It runs into thousands of dollars per turnover. Are the people you employ living up to your expectations? How effective are your **interviewing skills**? Do you have an efficient **recruitment management system** in place? The selection process is critical to sourcing the right staff that are likely to stay longer, and a HR system sets boundaries and protects you in the long run

When business is quiet, staff can become complacent and service often suffers. Make sure your staff are on the ball and more attentive to retain the few customers you may have. This is a time when they have the time to get to know your customers. Have them attend to those jobs you can't get done in the busy period; cleaning, restocking and rearranging the restaurant or kitchen. Send idle staff out to hand out flyers. Organise a sales competition to up-sell your menu and wine list.



Menu and Trends

Is your **signature dish** your USP? If your signature dish is not ultra-extraordinary, then it is not a 'USP'. A good signature dish is something that makes heads turn when carried through the restaurant.

What are the trends and how does your menu stack up?

Small regional and **locally grown produce** rates top of current world trends. Their popularity is based on the idea of farm-fresh produce with minimal transportation, and sourcing locally supports local communities and businesses.

If you have travelled, I am sure you remember a place for its sensory appeal of smell and taste. Tourists are looking for a local food experience, and will peruse your display menu stands for the local flavours.

You may be using local regional foods, but are you letting your customers know? Find out from your suppliers where the produce comes from, and insist on local where possible.

Take the opportunity to describe on your menu the source of your produce – Tableland potatoes, Mungalli Bio-dynamic yoghurt, Mareeba Mangoes, Gagarra Honey, Gulf Prawns, Queensland Catch Mackerel, Yamagishi Eggs. Visit the new Farmgate Market every Saturday at the Pier in Cairns for some unique local products.

If you check on the websites of the best restaurants of the world, or are lucky enough to have dined in them, you will see they **tell stories**. Stories about who grew their vegetables or made their salami, who produced their artisan cheese or supplied their eggs. Check out the French Laundry at www.frenchlaundry.com for a classic example.

As the **health trend** continues to grow, choosing certain foods to follow a personal philosophy has gained pace in the culinary world. Consumers are becoming more knowledgeable about the food they eat, and chefs are fulfilling the demand for dishes that follow these trends. Ethical food trade, sustainable seafood, and artisan foods have become of interest to the consumer. So consider describing your seafood as *line-caught* coral trout; if it is. A healthy trend of menus is to include and reference organic produce, gluten free, low GI and healthy kids meals.

Other trends include **innovative methods** and **new serving options** offer lower priced menu items such as bite-size desserts, new cuts of meat (cheaper cuts cooked well), small plates/tapas/mezze/dim sum, and can add extra profitability to your bottom line.

With computer technology, menus can be changed on a more regular basis which works well for seasonal local foods. A daily special is great tool to keep your menu fresh, move stock and also test potential new menu items.

Advertising and Promotion

How do you advertise and promote your restaurant? Is it in an ad hoc manner or do you have a plan? What budget have you set aside for marketing purposes? I find it sad when a business has a budget for everything else except for marketing their product. It's a 'build it and they will come' attitude. Wrong!

A well planned **marketing strategy** will identify and target your specific customers and give you the best possible value for your advertising dollar. Getting professional advice on developing a sound market plan and advertising and promotional plan that will give you and your business direction with a consistent representation of your branding.

Do you keep advertising in this economic downturn? Yes, if you have something significant to say and you **monitor the outcome** to find that the advertising cost is being more than covered by the extra



profit. But how will you know if it's working? If you are communicating with your customer on a regular basis you will know. If you use a retrieval mechanism such as a tear off coupon for discount or a free glass of wine, you will know. Monitoring your advertising and promotional activities enables you to 'tweak' and fine tune your marketing strategy.

There are a number of ways to promote your business without expensive outlays. Gathering a **database** of your customers and potential customers is invaluable for ongoing marketing. The (old) business card competition is a start to developing a database that can keep an ongoing communication with the community and your business at the '**top of the mind**' position. Prix Fixe (set price) menu with a modest price can offer affordability. Hosting special events using alliances with your suppliers can prove successful in bringing new customers to your establishment. Public relations with the media can gain you priceless exposure in the press.

However there is no sense in spending money on advertising and promotion if you don't look after the customer the first time to give them a reason to return. That is money constantly going down the drain.

Four walls Marketing is what *you* and your staff do when the customer enters your four walls. It's how you treat them and what you do to give them a reason to come back. It's about getting to know everyone that comes into your restaurant and making them feel important. There are plenty of average restaurants with average food that are packed, because the customers are made to feel important.

Give aways! A good restaurateur will also budget how much goodwill they can give away. A free glass of wine, a complimentary port or liqueur, an amuse bouché to start the meal and in some cases, even a meal 'on the house'. Most people like recognition, and if someone continually comes back to your restaurant; recognise their value with a giveaway. In the scheme of things, it doesn't really cost you much, but means a great deal to the customer. Do it.

If you have a discerning restaurant with your menu's price geared to quality of produce, service and ambiance, then in this economic downturn, be very careful **not to compromise** in any these areas, as it will surely be discovered by the discerning diner.

Remember the three ways to grow your business:-

1. Get more customers into your business
2. Get your existing customers to come back more often
3. Get your customers to spend more

Cheers!
Nola Craig



Nola Craig **Food & Beverage Marketing and Concept Development Consultant.**

Nola gained a vast experience of food and beverage marketing from many years with Hilton Hotels of Australia where her talent for thinking 'outside the square' created several significant and award winning events, promotions and restaurant concepts in Hilton hotels in Perth, Melbourne & Cairns.

She is recognised in Cairns for the total concept development of Mondo Cafe Bar and Grill where her rule for 'it has to be tight to be right' together with her eye for detail, ensured the sustained success of this restaurant 15 years later. Nola developed the concept plan and market plan that encompassed the meaning of Mondo, the selection of the menu, wines and beverages, operating equipment, music, uniforms and selection of staff, the style of service and most important, the training and culture of Mondo.

She consults to a number of restaurants and hotels and is also known for her promotion of regional tropical foods.