

Food & Beverage - How to Boost Your Lunch Trade - By Ken Burgin

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What happened to the customers? They're still around, but their needs have changed. Listed below are the core strategies from smart operators we've talked to in the last 12 months.

Add your Tip to the How to Boost Your Lunch Trade Online Survey. All participants will be sent the complete list of tips and suggestions, and will go into a draw to WIN 12 months 1st Class Membership of Profitable Hospitality.

Business boosters include:

Open before midday. Chances are the kitchen is almost ready at 11.30am and you can build up a headwind by opening earlier. For all-day operations, ensure the lunch menu is ready by mid-morning.

Boost business with local 'walk arounds'. Send your most confident server out once a month with business cards, menus and function information. This absolutely works - there will be phone calls even before she returns!

Speed up the greeting and seating process. Dedicated hosting is essential if you do volume - can the person who seats customers also take a first drink order?

Improve service speed. Can everything you serve be on the table in 12 minutes or less? If customers can be in and out within 35 minutes, you're half-way there: one course, a drink and a coffee, with the account paid and card processed. Check the service cycle to find all the points where 30 seconds could be saved. Sometimes it's the 'seating, menus and ordering' segment that wastes up to 10 minutes.

Calm everyone with fast drinks and bread service. A customer's minute feels like five if they're hungry - hats off to the Outback Steakhouse that had drinks on our table within 60 seconds last week. Not because we asked, but because they are organised.

Adjust your prices without looking cheap. Lunchtime prices should generally be lower than dinner, but that doesn't imply low quality. Different dishes that are faster to make and more economical.

Lighter menu options. Yes, some things will have to go off the menu. Chances are you're creating lighter choices across all menu segments - low carb, low fat, less salt, tons of flavour. Eating with the hands is also more popular!

Create pre-ordering options for groups. Have the menu online for them to download, choose and fax back. Obviously with conditions, and you will have the organiser's undying gratitude if you seat and feed her group in plenty of time (yes, it sounds like feeding children).

Be clever with the bookings. We know customers find it hard to be on time, so 'firm and fair' guidance will make it easier for you to stagger arrivals and avoid bottlenecks. In our busy Italian restaurant the instruction was clear: 'we hold the table for 10 minutes - if you're running late please call us'. It works! Online reservation systems like BookingAngel are often preferred by corporates.

Ensure staff manage business customers with finesse. If they are inexperienced and too casual, coach them or replace. It's not stiffness and reserve that's needed, but politeness and a sense of decorum.

Yes, you can sell desserts. They need to be fast, light and delivered as quickly as the coffee. Shared desserts reduce the guilt factor - sweet treats that can be shared are ideal eg a petit-fours plate. Special coffees are another upselling option.

Lightning fast payments. Customers can change from relaxed to anxious in those last few minutes, so efficient POS systems and modern credit card processing (check tableside options) are essential.

Send them away with information for a return - a card, a folded copy of the menu and information about group bookings.

Profitable Hospitality offers management and cost-control systems (Manuals & CD-ROMs) for restaurants, cafes, hotels, bars and clubs. The systems are based on the extensive consulting and operating experience of CEO Ken Burgin, and enable busy owners and managers to set up complete operating and cost-control systems in minutes, not months. Profitable Hospitality also runs regular management training workshops in the areas of kitchen profit & efficiency, restaurant marketing and functions management. A free monthly e-newsletter keeps you up to date on the latest industry management issues. www.profitablehospitality.com.

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