

Food & Beverage - Maintaining Sales When Customer Numbers Fall - By Ken Burgin

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When times are tough, there's a lot you can't do: the weather, employment rates and economic policies are all outside your 'circle of influence'.

But once you catch the attention of potential visitors, there's a lot you CAN do to convert them into a paying customer who has a great time, spends up and plans to return.

If you don't want to pay for new promotion, now's the time to check the effectiveness of all existing sales and marketing efforts. If they're under-performing, fix or eliminate them - it's no time for half-baked results.

How well is the usual business advertising working? If you spend lots of money on Yellow Pages, is it effective? Do the advertisements in local papers or expensive magazines really work? Would some Google AdWords get better results?

How well are phone calls handled? When I rang to book a pizza restaurant recently and inquired about parking, I was told by the young dude who answered that 'it's a bit of a nightmare in this area'. Bad answer - it mightn't be easy, but that is not the right script! How are calls answered out of hours, and how many phone inquiries turn into firm bookings? Mystery phone calls can be illuminating.

How well does your website turn browsers into customers? Does it have a strong message, tons of information and an attractive layout? Or is it uber-cool and intimidating, or old fashioned and uninviting?

How well do you turn email inquiries into sales? When the request comes in for a party menu or booking date, there's an expectation of a same-day response - better still same hour. How many of these turn into paying customers? How can you check?

When did you last contact the regular customers? A short email, a postcard, or a menu in a hand-written envelope will nudge customers who've forgotten you - they always work. For emailing, try ConstantContact, the email newsletter I've used for the last 5 years - it's brilliant. Experiment with their free 60 day trial.

Are the community groups you support returning the favour? They may need reminding that your big heart is based on commercial reality. How many are regular customers?

Promote the sale of high-profit items. Not the high priced items, but your house-made Lemonade (sugar, lemon concentrate and water) instead of bottled sodas, juicy pork ribs instead of expensive steaks, or raspberry mousse (with frozen berries and pre-mix) instead of bought-in cakes. Recipe software will give you the truth about profit margins.

How well are staff selling to customers? Repeat after me: 'Most staff can't sell until you show them how!' Customers visit to spend money - how much they part with is up to you. Most leave with unexpected change in their pocket, so how are the sales of side orders, second drinks, desserts and bar snacks?

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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