



Primed For New Product Success

Q: What are the best ways to promote a new menu item?

A: Product innovation is no longer simply a positioning strategy; it's become a necessity for all quick serves. So it's smart to look into introducing a new menu item.

Take care to identify the right new product for your concept. A great new product lies at the intersection of what people want from you and what you do best. To find that sweet spot, do an investigation into emerging lifestyle and food trends and look beyond your direct competition to other types of restaurants and food retailers. While your new item should be trend-right, it should also be differentiated—don't simply copy an item that's successful elsewhere. Pretzel buns seem to be the latest hot ingredient, for example. If you want to offer a product that includes a pretzel bun, you better offer your own unique spin on it, or else stay away from pretzel buns and do something completely different.

Home in on your target customer. As I've explained before, targeting discrete customer segments produces more efficient, focused marketing and operations. Targeting doesn't mean you turn away other customers. It simply means you prioritize your efforts—including new product development—on those customers who are most valuable to your business. Trying to develop new items that satisfy all of your customers can be difficult, if not impossible. Introducing new products specifically designed for your target—a new ribs and chicken dinner for families, for example—will attract more of the type of customers you desire. So identify what your target customers want that no one else is offering.

Think about your operational strengths and capabilities, as well as your brand personality and positioning. Your new product should leverage your competitive advantages. If you're known for wood-fired pizzas, for example, other products made in your wood-burning stove might reinforce the unique taste profile you offer and the special experience of seeing products made in your oven.

You also might want to think about entire platforms, not just a single product—for example, a line of smoothie flavors, a trio of sandwiches that use the same carrier, or a single protein that can be added to a salad, sandwich, and wrap. If you introduce all of the items in the platform at once, you can make a big splash and spread your costs over multiple products. If you introduce them sequentially over a period of time, you can build some traffic momentum and do cross-promotions. Either way, you'll get more bang for your buck.

Once you have the right product, develop a marketing plan by starting with objectives and strategies. Ask yourself why you want the new product. Is it to increase visit frequency from current customers? To attract entirely new customers? To generate

traffic in different dayparts or occasions? To shift your menu mix to higher-profit items? To steal share from a competitor?

If you're clear about your objectives, you'll be able to determine which marketing tactics are most appropriate. Don't take a one-size-fits-all approach. If you need broad awareness, then advertising and a social media awareness campaign are the best tactics. If higher visit-frequency is important, then go with a customer relationship-management program where you offer bounce-backs and other targeted offers to existing customers. High-visibility in-store signage, menu call-outs, sampling, and employee greeting scripts usually produce results across the board.

A price discount on a new product is the most common promotional strategy. But as two recent successful product introductions show, other tactics can be just as powerful. Prior to its Doritos Locos Tacos launch, Taco Bell ran a Twitter campaign in which people retweeted tweets about the new product to win a visit from the Taco Bell Truck. McDonald's signed up Olympic gold medal gymnast Gabby Douglas to promote its new Egg White Delight McMuffin at in-store publicity events.

You might not have the budget or resources to conduct a launch campaign of these proportions, but you can generate similar results by running your own content-driven social media campaign, or by using local heroes and events to tie your new product to the news. Also note how each of these examples used tactics specifically appropriate for the brands' target audiences. Taco Bell successfully reached the Millennial consumer with its fun, offbeat social media effort. McDonald's spoke to health-conscious people by tying to someone who espouses a healthy lifestyle.

Finally, consider introducing the new item as a limited-time offer. Doing so allows you to gauge the level of demand for the product before making it a permanent addition to your menu and operations. You can also more easily take the product off the menu and tweak it or its name, price, or messaging as needed. And as McDonald's learned with its McRib, you can generate strong word of mouth and pent-up demand by running an LTO multiple times.

Above all, the most important aspect of a new product launch is employee training. Not only do your employees need to be proficient in making the product, they should also be able to describe it and answer questions about it. Let them sample the item and explain to them the strategy and marketing programs behind it. Nothing will take the wind out of your marketing sails faster than an employee who is uninformed or unexcited about your new product.

Engaged employees, a differentiated product that's trend-right and target-focused, and a targeted marketing plan add up to a successful launch. 