



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

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What Can Your Brand Learn From "America's Next Great Restaurant"?

By Denise Lee Yohn

A nine-week crash course on everything you wanted to know about opening your own restaurant chain, "America's Next Great Restaurant" provided a viewers with the inside skinny on how to create a new fast-casual restaurant concept from the ground up.

As contestants competed in weekly challenges on the TV reality show, such as serving a mob of hungry people and taking their concept to the streets in a food truck, judges—doubling as investors in the winning concept—doled out critiques and advice. Below are 10 tasty takeaways.

1. **Make a powerful first impression with your brand identity.** Your brand identity is comprised of the name of your concept, your logo, slogan, and visuals/photography. All of these play an important role in getting people's attention and enticing them to try your restaurant. "Saucy Balls" might have been a clever name for a meatball restaurant, but the concept really came to life when the contestant changed it to "Brooklyn Meatball Co." and created a brand identity that conveyed authentic homemade New York Italian food.
2. **Keep the focus on the food.** Outstanding service and a memorable experience are important, but they won't matter if you don't deliver on the food. In many of the show's challenges, the public was invited to experience the contestant's concepts and those with the best-tasting food always won.
3. **Deliver on category drivers.** A restaurant concept must be aligned with the unique drivers of its category. "America's Next Great Restaurant" was about creating a fast casual concept and so portability, frequency, and affordability were key drivers. When the contestant with the Indian food concept figured out how to make a taco-style sandwich with naan bread, he increased the viability of his concept. On the other hand, several of the contestants were criticized for serving food that was too heavy or too distinctive to drive frequent repeat visits.
4. **Pay attention to details.** Overlooking small details proved to be the linchpin for several contestants. The judges called out a contestant for using canned beans when her concept was supposed to feature healthy, natural foods. Another contestant used packaged red pepper flakes, which were a big disconnect from his authentic Italian cuisine. Every detail communicates and is an opportunity to reinforce your brand—or detract from it.
5. **Make sure you have the right people.** Several contestants ran into trouble with their

chefs. One chef didn't have experience preparing the type of food his concept offered. Another chef wasn't completely on board with his concept and he distracted the contestant from executing well. The judges viewed the way the contestants managed people as tests of leadership and courage, two critical qualities of a successful restaurant owner.

6. **Be different but not too much.** The best concepts are those that are both familiar and unique. A wrap sandwich concept and a chicken wing concept were eliminated early in the competition because the judges didn't find anything special about the ideas, while a Vietnamese concept and a pot pie concept were dropped for being too niche.
7. **Choose what NOT to do.** Starting any business involves making a lot decisions, and decisions about what *not* to do may be some of the most important. Focusing on a single target segment or a particular geographic region may seem limiting, but making these tough decisions ultimately pays off. A focused concept is easier to execute. And a brand that tries to appeal to too wide of an audience usually ends up lacking that something special to distinguish itself.
8. **Engage your employees with your brand.** When contestants were challenged with hiring and training people to work in their restaurants, the winners were those who effectively engaged employees with their brand. The employees were able to promote the uniqueness of the concept and describe the food in very compelling ways. Employees' pride and passion for your brand will draw customers in.
9. **Know your brand DNA and stick to it.** The judges faulted several contestants for not having a clear vision for their concepts—if they didn't know what they stand for, how could they expect customers to?! Start out by defining the core attributes and tenets of your concept—the DNA of your brand. Then make every decision with that DNA in mind. One of the contestants struggled after flipping her concept from one based on fixed-calorie meals to one with a broader menu based on natural healthy food.
10. **Be inspired AND inspiring.** The weekly competitions really challenged the contestants, and those who viewed them as opportunities to learn and grow did just that. They took the judges' advice to heart and were inspired to do even better the following week. At the same time, some contestants' passion and commitment inspired the judges to have confidence in them and give them second chances. The same can be said for future patrons, who, if in inspired by your offerings, will stick with you and support you through the inevitable growing pains as well as future concept evolution.

"America's Next Great Restaurant" provided aspiring restaurateurs with a great opportunity to learn some valuable lessons—and made its viewers, who likely are also restaurant patrons, a bit more savvy, too.

Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands and grow their businesses for over 20 years. World-class brands such as Sony, Frito-Lay, Burger King, and Jack In the Box have engaged Denise, an established speaker, author, and consulting partner. Contact Denise at Denise@qsr magazine.com.

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