



Make It a Familiar Favorite

Q: My company is planning to launch an Indian quick serve. This may be a challenge as there is no big Indian quick-serve chain in the U.S. What do you think should be the marketing strategy for the launch?

—Omesh Sehgal, Project Manager, Deep Foods Inc.

A: Congratulations on branching out, Omesh! With ethnic foods becoming increasingly mainstream in recent years, the market seems ripe for new ethnic quick-service restaurants, including Indian food. But, as you note, there are unique challenges to introducing a new category.

Before we discuss promoting the launch of your concept, let's talk about your brand identity and positioning. You need to craft a brand platform that properly introduces your concept to folks who may not be familiar with Indian food.

Although your instinct may be to emphasize the authenticity and heritage of your brand, a smarter approach is to lower the perceived risks of trying something new and make your offerings seem accessible and familiar. Consider how Chipotle popularized the burrito, not through an authentic Mexican appeal but by promoting fresh, real food. This approach is important for quick serves in particular because you have to have enough mainstream appeal to generate the necessary volume to be profitable at fast food prices.

People are turned off by things they don't easily understand. Select a name for your concept that is easy to pronounce and spell. Develop a logo, color palette, and visuals for your communications and store design that convey a contemporary, established brand. Use a simple, straightforward tagline and messaging to convey your brand essence. Be creative, but not fanciful.

Speaking of brand essence, your brand should stand for something that is meaningful and valuable to your customers—perhaps distinctive flavors, healthy ingredients, or even a colorful lifestyle. Your competitive position is more sustainable and valuable if you connect to your customers' lifestyles and emotions. Don't just promote a flavor profile or type of food, especially if that flavor or food is new to them.

Your launch strategy should also be designed to lower the perceived risk of your food. Use sampling to get people familiar with your offerings. If your location enjoys heavy foot traffic, set up a sampling station out front and staff it with an outgoing, sales-oriented employee. If not, bring your food to people at community events like street fairs, local sports games, and Chamber of Commerce meetings. Set up a booth at international fairs and film festivals. Offer to cater school or church events. Participate

in "taste of the town" events in your neighborhood. Whenever you do sampling or catering, pass out menus and coupons to prompt people to take the next step and visit your location.

Sampling inside your restaurant is just as important. Offer tastes of different dishes to folks as they peruse your menu. When a customer orders one item, give him a sample of another dish or of a side or dessert. That way you incentivize them to come back to try other menu items.

Also, offer a guarantee. Let customers know if they don't like what they order, they can try something else or get their money back. Very few customers will take advantage of the offer, but almost everyone will appreciate the reassurance. Again, it's all about reducing risk.

To promote your launch, contact the local media and invite them to an exclusive preview of your restaurant. If they choose to do a story on your opening, you'll get some free exposure, and if they explain your concept and menu in some detail, the piece will educate the community and make them more open to trying something new.

Use high-visibility signage (banners, flags, balloons) to let people know you're open for business. Do community outreach and street marketing to raise awareness. See my column from last month's *QSR* for more local-store marketing recommendations.

Employee training is an important aspect of a launch strategy that restaurateurs often overlook. When your offerings are unusual or unfamiliar, training your frontline employees is even more critical. Your employees should be able to explain your menu and describe all of the items—what ingredients are in them, how they're prepared, and what they taste like. Make sure they have favorite products to suggest and can make recommendations based on what customers say they're interested in or in the mood for. They should be patient and prepared for customers to ask a lot of questions and take more time than usual to order.

Once customers have visited your restaurant, you want them to come back and bring their friends. Simply thanking them and asking them to tell other people if they liked your restaurant goes a long way. Beyond that, consider using bounce-back coupons with a short expiration period to prompt another visit soon. Design your coupons with offers for multiple meals (two for the price of one, for example) to encourage a return visit with a friend. Attach take-out menus to coupons to remind people of your great food and to make it easy for them to give to family members.

Introducing a new ethnic concept takes a lot of time, money, and effort—but by following this roadmap, you can ensure that your restaurant will become a familiar favorite. 