

SmartBlog on Restaurants

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[7 things aspiring restaurateurs can learn from “America’s Next Great Restaurant”](#)

By [Guest Blogger](#) on April 5, 2011 | [Comments \(2\)](#)

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Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands and grow their businesses for more than 20 years. World-class brands such as [Sony](#), [Frito-Lay](#), [Burger King](#) and [Jack in the Box](#) have engaged Yohn, an established speaker, author and consultant. Read more by Yohn at www.deniseleeyohn.com.

It’s the American Dream — start your own business, become a success, retire a billionaire. If only it were that easy. Nowhere is this more apparent than on NBC’s reality TV show “[America’s Next Great Restaurant](#).”

The contestants compete for the chance to open a new restaurant concept. A panel of judges who will invest in the new concept determines their fate. As the contest unfolds, the contestants learn just how hard it is to come up with a compelling concept, figure out the right branding for it, and execute it well enough to meet the expectations of demanding judges and discriminating consumers.

Each episode is chock-full of lessons for aspiring restaurateurs — here are seven of them:

1. **It's about the food.** This may seem like a no-brainer, but on the show it's clear that not everyone appreciates that great-tasting food is the most important aspect of their restaurant concept. Aspiring restaurateurs have to live, eat, breathe and love the food they serve. It's a restaurant, after all.
2. **But the food isn't enough.** Food may win people's stomachs, but a clearly differentiated brand identity and positioning wins their hearts. To be memorable, a restaurant concept has to offer something unique or express a new point of view. The concepts that stand out on the show — and on the streets today — are based on exciting offerings and distinct brand personalities.
3. **Restaurateurs must be resilient.** Restaurants are among the hardest businesses to run, requiring determination and sacrifice on the part of the owner and employees. It's not enough to be a great chef or a smooth-talking salesperson. Restaurateurs must have the passion to sustain themselves through long days and nights of hard, physical work — and the charisma to inspire the people working for them. It takes a special kind of leader.
4. **Able to make tough calls.** Leadership also involves making hard decisions. The pace of the restaurant business calls for making tough calls quickly and decisively, and the judges favor contestants who demonstrate these leadership qualities.
5. **And take risks.** Sometimes it's best to go with the gut. In one episode, a contestant changed course and prepared an unexpected menu item in order to prove his concept had a broad range. His decision impressed the judges because it demonstrated the ability and willingness to take calculated risks.
6. **Strong name + descriptive slogan = winning combination.** A restaurant name and slogan should work together to communicate the concept, express the brand personality and relate to the food — plus be clear and simple. The name works like bait to get people's attention; the slogan is like the hook that catches their interest; together, they draw people in.
7. **Execution. Execution. Execution.** The true measure of any restaurant concept is how well it's executed. Fast-casual restaurants must serve large numbers of people in short periods of time. When the show's contestants had to work the lunch hour at a [Chipotle](#) restaurant, they learned this isn't an easy feat.

Many people dream of opening their own restaurant, but few follow through and even fewer succeed. Thanks to lessons learned from “America's Next Great Restaurant,” success may become that much more accessible.

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