

articles and tips

Getting through the Challenge of Tough Economic Times

By Tom Kelley and Denis Sparagis

Alliances. It is the one simple word that successful operators have realized truly matters in both good and challenging times. As your business navigates the leaner times ahead, consider the following recommendations:

Build community partnerships: reach out and sustain win-win affiliations with professional and recreational groups that cater to your primary customer segments – baseball leagues for the casual segment; business associations/chambers for higher-end dining.

Give to one charity: talk to your guests and staff to designate one local or national organization (with a local affiliate) to support for at least one year. While no one likes to say no to the multiple “asks” received almost daily by operators, few will argue with a the good cause you are supporting. Be sure that the organization you support supports your local community by getting on a local affiliate Board.

Lead: Lend your business expertise to a local nonprofit or chamber. Become not just a business leader, but a civic leader. Lead on local, regional, state and national levels. Don’t just join organizations, help shape them.

Showcase: Participate in food shows and festivals. Concentrate on your one or two signature dishes – ones you do better than anyone. Use your website to keep guests familiar with your signature dishes and activities

Promote: List your alliances on the back of your menu. Tell a little about your charity support and why the team thought it was worthy. Let the charity promote you as well. Better they tell your story than you do. Use your website and a blog to promote your food.

Be seen: Get out of your kitchen or dining room and dine at other restaurants, create friendships with other operators and chefs. Chefs walk the dining room and interact with your guests. Support and physically shop at local businesses. Show up for community events.

Motivate the troops: Incentivize your team to promote your signature creations. Get them out into the community as well. Reward them and keep them.

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Having proposed these recommendations, allow us to remind you of two “don’ts”:

Don’t coupon: It highly diminishes your brand and the value of your establishment. If you feel the need to promote, create tasteful cards to insert in check jackets or distribute around town that suggest folks come back and enjoy your signature dishes during different meal time segments. Promote a new dish or appetizer combos. Never talk about price or percentage off.

Don’t advertise (much): It’s one of the biggest drains on your bottom line. Create news releases and, if possible, hire a marketing or public relations expert to help you generate some tactical and strategic news and buzz about your establishment. If needed, do a trade with a local magazine or newspaper for a one-time ad. Use your website and a blog as well.

One last thing, don’t be afraid to ask for help. We know there’s a lot of pride and perhaps just a bit of an ego in all of us, but you can’t be an expert at everything. Reach out to other operators, other chefs, web resources or specialty consultants for a quick review of operations or with specific questions. None of us can do it alone.

Again, it’s about alliances.

Tom Kelley and Denis Sparagis, Principals in Concept Branding Group, with locations in Washington, DC, New England, and Canada. The firm specializes in building and refining brands, building end-to-end operational solutions for hospitality operators and in helping operators and suppliers build meaningful and enduring alliances.