



REOPENING YOUR RESTAURANT: FROM HIGH-TOUCH TO NO-TOUCH

While some restaurant guests are more than ready to dine out, a large number will harbor cleanliness and food safety concerns. As you move forward towards reopening, make plans to address emerging customer needs in a thoughtful and proactive way.

Remember a couple of months ago when restaurants were grappling with rising hourly wages and a massive labor shortage, while big chain brands were losing traction? Eight weeks later, we're seeing massive unemployment rates for restaurant staff, a dine-in lockdown, and a surge in business for Domino's and Applebee's.

As restaurants in a handful of states cautiously open their doors again, it's definitely not dining as usual. Every establishment — from the mom and pop spots to fast-food chains — will be forced to drastically alter every aspect of their operation to function in this "next normal." The restaurants that will survive and ultimately thrive include those who transform their business to directly address the concerns of a nervous dining public, as well as an industry flooded with talent and fewer competitors.

Our Synergy consultants regrouped to outline strategies and tactics to help restaurants develop a reopening roadmap that addresses guest worries through updated operations.

REVIEW VENTILATION AND SEATING SYSTEMS

While your restaurant guests are definitely eager to get out of the house, they're still going to be concerned about contracting COVID-19 wherever they go. Besides spreading your tables apart, think through all the ways you can reassure your patrons that you consider their health top of mind:

- With recent news about restaurant air conditioning systems having been proven to transmit the virus, consider alternative ventilation. Replace regular windows with ones that can be opened with screens and install more fans with summer temperatures on the horizon.
- Outdoor seating will be more popular with your guests, so consider how to make this most comfortable in the summer months. Invest in umbrellas, fans with misters, and implement systems and technology to make service to these areas most efficient. An additional POS terminal at an outdoor service station, or handheld POS devices, can help.
- Revise and update training materials and daily checklists to be in accordance with new guidelines which will undoubtedly change over the next several weeks. Consider using digital checklist technology for improved oversight and accountability as new processes emerge.
- An option to disposable menus, consider chalkboards or digital boards placed strategically around the restaurant with printed one-use menus as backup. Another option would be online menus that are clearly designed to be read on the guest's phone.

FOCUS MARKETING ON COMMUNITY AND GUEST CONCERNS

Marketing to current and potential customers is critical to build traffic during re-opening. Just as you've been communicating messages of support for your community, continue marketing your restaurant in the same vein. Especially during this time, keep track of ALL contact information for guests who order online, by phone, mobile, and walk-in. Your goal is to announce your re-opening by continuing your commitment to your customers and show how you've adapted to meet their changing needs.

Connect with the Community

- Offer schools a discount on catering
- Offer teachers gift cards at ½ off
- Send welcome back cards that offer a free item during slower hours to drive traffic
- Provide a buy-one-give-one offer; customers buy an item and the restaurant gifts one to a frontline worker

Create Timely Menu Items

- Add Family Packs, Date Night Packs, Movie Night Packs, Zoom Happy Hour Packs, Friday Game Night (include a game branded to your concept)
- Improve your packaging with tamper-proof seals, and brand it with your logo, tagline, and marketing message

Enhance Your Website

- Refresh your website with a “clean” and uncluttered design to reinforce the idea of a clean restaurant
- Rewrite messaging to be clear and straightforward to help make your site easy to navigate
- Enhance the design of your “Order Now” button to make it a prominent element

Create New Social Media and Promotional Messages

- Take photos of new menu items to display on social media
- Show how you are adapting and complying to new COVID-19 CDC rules with images of employees using new cleaning procedures while wearing protective gloves and masks
- Run a contest for Friday Game Night to promote guests ordering takeout, taking a photo, and posting with your hashtag; choose one winner each week and send them a gift card

TAKE A NEW APPROACH TO HIRING

With restaurants just beginning to reopen, it's time to check in now with all current staff members on payroll. Even if you're not sure of your opening date, you'll know who on your team is still available and who has moved on:

- Verify they are still available, and/or will be in the short term
- Gather details about anticipated and desired schedules
- Create an anticipated schedule now
- When hiring, remember that time and talent is on your side. Interview candidates two or three times, especially for management positions.

USE TECHNOLOGY FOR TOUCH-FREE MENUS

One-use paper menus are likely the new normal for restaurants, but this is a perfect time to introduce technology that can streamline the process for you and your guests. Nearly everyone has a smart phone by their side, and it is already used to house menus for third-party ordering apps today. You can easily tie your menu to a QR code that is located at the table. A guest simply opens up their smart phone camera and snaps the code to access your menu, touch-free.

The benefits to you are:

- No labor costs to produce and maintain disposable menus
- Reduced material expenses like toner, ink, paper, and single-use pencils
- Menu re-engineering advantages to streamline, optimize and to drive guests to order more high-margin items for better profitability
- Flexibility in having one place to go to update menu items, pricing, and even entertain a “dynamic pricing” strategy like Uber and Lyft do when demand is high to maximize revenue
- Combine your digital menu with a loyalty program to capture guest information, allowing you to market to and communicate with guests long-term

You can always have some disposable menus on hand for when someone needs or prefers larger menu formats, or a menu with large type sizes for seniors.

A NEW TAKE ON TO-GO ORDERS

Like most aspects of the restaurant business, catering has changed dramatically over the last couple of months. Consider the following as you move forward with catering, pick-up, and to-go orders:

- Reorganize your systems to handle smaller group orders — think 4 to 6 and 8 to 10 people — as opposed to 25 to 30.

- Individual lunch boxes will likely sell better than platters or salad bowls; sandwiches are a good starting point but be prepared to rethink packaging and hot lunch box delivery
- Move away from unwrapped sandwiches on sandwich platters to individually wrapped and labeled sandwiches
- Replace fountain drinks with individually bottled beverages
- Include sanitizer wipes or a small bottle of branded hand sanitizer with all to-go orders.
- Set up a system of stickers or labels to demonstrate that all to-go orders are tamper-free
- Restaurants and consumers are moving away from third-party delivery companies in favor of ordering direct from restaurants; use this opportunity to develop an internal delivery staff and system
- Employers are starting to offer a stipend to workers from home to pay for food delivery; take advantage of this development and tailor LTOs or family meal packages for these workers
- In every to-go order, include a note card outlining food safety and sanitation packages followed while packaging the order

TAKE A WALK IN THEIR SHOES

As much as the world of restaurants has changed, in some ways they've stayed the same. As you get set to reopen, it's natural to think about how to kick start your revenue engine. However, your first responsibility — as always — is to preserve the health and safety of your team members first, and your guests second.

A good method for doing so is to perform three tours through your establishment, with key team members in tow:

- The first is to map the journey of your guest, starting in the parking lot all the way through them paying for their meal and walking back to their car. Put yourself in your customer's shoes. How can you create a guest experience that makes them feel good about dining with you? Do you need a hand sanitizer stand at the door? Individually packaged condiments, including salt and pepper? Sanitizer labels on seats and tables? As you walk through the guest experience, brainstorm ways you can build guest trust and confidence, then put a plan together to execute.

- The second tour is to examine the flow of food through your kitchen, from receiving to serving. The goal is to identify all food storage, handling, and preparation steps to ensure the highest levels of food safety. With guests being extremely sensitive to getting ill, you must do everything in your power to eliminate conditions that can result in foodborne illness.
- The third tour is much like the first, except you're reviewing your operation through the eyes of your to-go customer. How can you prepare and package to-go orders with as little contact as possible? How can you reassure guests that their food has been handled properly? How can you select packaging items that reinforce the message of non-contact?

To make all of these adjustments, you'll need to redesign and deliver detailed training sessions and materials to all of your team members. If you're debating when you may reopen for dine-in business, now is the time to update those materials and administer the training in a proactive way.