



## Build a lucrative future by committing to a strategic marketing partnership

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As business becomes more competitive and guests grow more sophisticated, finding ways to get people to choose your restaurant is increasingly necessary. Partnership marketing, a valuable and often underutilized tool, offers a powerful solution, providing a way to gain significant exposure to potential new guests and new markets and increasing the benefit of what you provide current guests.

### What is partnership marketing?

Traditionally known as “cooperative advertising,” partnership marketing is linking up with like-minded organizations and businesses to reciprocally expose your concepts to one another’s customers and provide added value to your existing customers. Partnership marketing is a grass-roots approach to making marketing dollars last and increasing your visibility to people and market segments you didn’t have direct access to before.

### Where do we find our match?

Potential partners are all around you. They may include local civic organizations, such as the convention and visitors’ bureau, chamber of commerce, restaurant associations or other key city groups you can be involved in as a supporter. Also look at national industry organizations that have similar messages and objectives, such as the **National Restaurant Association**, and Share Our Strength, as well as others like the Multicultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance and Meals on Wheels.

Every chef and key manager in the restaurant ought to be actively involved in a civic group. If you’re not already participating in civic and industry organizations, you are way behind finding your partner. These are the most direct sources for partnership marketing.

More creative and strategic possibilities for alliances are close behind. Most fully realized opportunities come from partnering with a key cause. Cause-related partnership marketing begins by identifying what your restaurant concept stands for and determining where you can make an impact, then finding a local or national community or charity organization that has a mission that matches yours—and could refer potential business to your restaurant.

Be sure that no matter the cause—protecting the environment, improving education, fighting disease, eliminating poverty—the reason you choose to partner with this cause is to extend the reach of your marketing dollars and match the sensibilities of your guests. Giving back to the community and supporting worthy causes are justifiable reasons in their own right, but you also need to incorporate the social and financial return on investment in what is ultimately a business decision. For example, if your restaurant is a family-oriented concept, it makes sense to match yourself with a charity or organization that works to help underprivileged kids.

Your vendors also can help you find potential partners. Look at those who are creating products that could complement and enhance your concept and increase exposure for your restaurant by adding a level of excitement and press worthiness:

- Wine and spirits distributors to provide products for special events
- Wineries and winemakers, breweries and beer makers, for winemaker or beer maker dinners
- Artisans, farmers, ranchers and others who provide the foods you use in your restaurant for cross-promotion
- Fashion designers to create uniforms
- Residential interior designers to design the interior of your restaurant
- Furniture and product designers to design furniture and/or your tabletop
- Experts to implement specific programs into your restaurant or enhance the ones you already have in place. If you are focused on organic foods, for example, bring in an organic farmer or environmental expert for a special event or to fine-tune your menu.

Also look for potential partners in other products you use in your restaurant. Who provides the art? Who creates the glassware? Who makes the foods you offer that are not made in-house, such as breads, desserts or ice cream? What programs do you have in place for your guests? Is there an established author who could partner on a cookbook? Can your spirits distributor provide the beverages for an anniversary event you are hosting? Just as you have marketing budgets and goals for the type of guest you want to attract, so do all the vendors and suppliers from whom you buy items needed in your restaurant.

### **What saying “I do” really means.**

After taking the plunge and committing to a partnership, how do you make it work? For every partnership, keep in mind the return on investment on your expectations as well as the dollars invested. Key elements for any partnership include:

- Setting up an agreement that is clear on what both sides will contribute. This could include such things as the amount of dollars spent on an advertising campaign or event, the type and amount of product donated, access to customer information for direct mail campaigns, responsibility for creation of promotional materials, and public relations campaigns.
- Assigning a point person from each partner to take the lead and responsibility for the agreement
- Making sure you are able to measure and track the results of the partnership to show how it supports your concept and why you selected these partners.

### **Finding partnership bliss.**

Now that you're committed, how do you make it last? As the leader of your restaurant, you must support the partnership. If encouragement and support does not come from the top, the partnership will fail. Like any relationship, the alliances you create for partnership marketing efforts take work. Don't be a one-night stand. These partnerships are meant to be long-term and should be treated as a kind of marriage. If relationships are souring because you don't feel mutually satisfied, get an amicable divorce and don't take it personally.

In addition to the obvious exchange of complimentary product for guaranteed exposure, take advantage of the additional marketing opportunities now available to you. Share ideas for potential advertising, direct mail and press coverage—be sure to look at online and offline opportunities—as well as steps necessary to build your relationship into something long term, stable and successful.

Not only will you be contributing to those organizations and businesses that help support your industry and thus your business, you will be seen as a partner and leader by the others involved in these groups' boards and committees. The results can be anything from long-term partnerships to immediate referrals. From a strategic perspective, the more involved you are in your community and your industry, the more you are viewed as a leading force. From a tactical perspective, people are much more comfortable referring friends and family to businesses where they have connections, a friend or a relationship.

Other benefits to partnership marketing include an opportunity for your employees to get involved with causes they support, which builds morale internally and increases the visibility of your restaurant externally. You also provide a greater focus and continuity to your marketing plan, which means you can just say no to all the random requests for time and money donations and contributions.

The power of partnership marketing is easy to see. If you align yourself with the right partners under the right conditions, the outcome will be a successful extension of your marketing resources and greater visibility for your concept, ultimately contributing to your top and bottom lines.

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