



What's the buzz

Restaurants must get people talking to succeed

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DAYTONA BEACH -- There was a time when a good reputation and positive reviews were enough to build a successful restaurant.

Those times are long gone, according to marketing professionals whose job it is to build "buzz" about an eatery.

Instead, business owners have to be adept at creating public relations campaigns that raise both media and consumer awareness of their business.

Some local restaurants, such as Ruby's, The Downwind Cafe and Stonewood Tavern & Grill as well as chains, such as Crispers, Friendly's, Panera Bread and Uno Chicago Grill are trying to do just that.

"Some restaurateurs believe advertising is the best way; however, it's often the most expensive and least effective method," said Patrick Galvin, founder of a California-based public relations and marketing consulting firm whose past clients include numerous restaurants.

Americans are drowning in a flood of advertising that will cost companies in the United States nearly \$300 billion in 2005, approximately \$1,000 per person," said Galvin, who conducts what he calls a "Restaurant Buzz Camp" designed to provide owners of single units or just a couple of units with strategies and tools necessary to succeed.

"When consumers are inundated with commercials, they tune out. Even advertisers realize that their messages are getting ignored," he said.

While national chains may be able to absorb the cost of advertising, small eateries would find it hard to swallow and stay in business.

That is where building a buzz comes in, according to Galvin. By embracing new concepts in marketing and a new way of communicating, restaurant owners set themselves up for success.

Such methods include staging cooking demonstrations for some of the best customers, developing an e-mail list to maintain an ongoing dialogue with them and aligning the restaurant with some charity or nonprofit event.

These types of things will get consumers talking, telling their friends about the business -- creating buzz, Galvin said.

Buzz is vital for small restaurants and newcomers such as Ruby's on ISB in Daytona Beach and The Downwind Cafe & Restaurant at Spruce Creek Fly-In.

Daisy Taylor Grimes, president and general manager of Ruby's, came to Daytona Beach in 1988 as co-owner of Imani Services Inc., then the food service provider for Bethune-Cookman College.

When that contract ended last year, Grimes was free to follow her dream of opening a fine dining establishment here that specialized in Southern cuisine.

"Either you have a small family operation with family working there or you step out and open something bigger. We felt we would take the financial risk" involved in the latter, Grimes said during a recent interview.

Ruby's is across the street from the Mary McLeod Bethune Performing Arts Center. It is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week.

So far, Grimes' reputation and contacts in the community have been enough to attract consumers. But she realizes that in order to keep the 60 seats in the dining room occupied, she has to do something to differentiate her restaurant.

Sometimes, it's the small things. "We work hard to make sure each customer is greeted and that the food tastes good," she said.

She also offers a private dining room, which has caught on among a number of area organizations looking for places to meet and eat.

Grimes said she has several other initiatives planned including dedicating the private dining room to the late Charles Cherry, who was a popular local figure. In coming weeks, the walls of the main room will be decorated with memorabilia and historic photos of the people and places that once existed in Midway, a historic name for the area of town where her business is.

The buzz about The Downwind Cafe has a lot to do with its location.

It's along the runway of Spruce Creek Fly-In

A couple of weeks after opening the 90-seat eatery in June, business owner Greg Farbolin placed a small ad in a Neighbors section of The Daytona Beach News-Journal.

The response has been well beyond what he expected, Farbolin said.

"We're getting people from the beachside and even Ormond Beach."

Besides the food, people like the idea of being able to get into the Fly-In, which is a gated community, and see the aircraft taxi by while they dine, said Farbolin, who also owns more than 200 Honeybaked Ham and Heavenly Ham stores in 16 states.

National chains, and even regional chains, have the money to advertise and it makes more sense for them to do so. Even so, chains such as Crispers and Panera Bread, which both opened units recently in Ormond Beach, still depend on buzz to keep customers coming back.

Michael Calhoon, president and chief executive officer of Crispers, said the company does a lot of direct marketing in surrounding neighborhoods to both home and businesses to help get the word out.

"We're very prudent with what we do. We spend a lot of money, but we spend it in the local market," Calhoon said, about the chain, which is owned by Publix Super Markets.

The chain also has a local area market coordinator for each restaurant whose duties include getting out into the community, working with schools and nonprofits to help build relationships, he said.

Some restaurants already take steps to communicate with customers on an ongoing basis as a way to maintain the buzz and keep folks coming back.

The Stonewood Grill & Tavern chain, which was founded in Ormond Beach and has since grown to 16 units, including two in North Carolina, publishes its own magazine filled with recipes and ideas for dining. The publication, which is mailed, also updates readers on the company's charitable efforts.

Friendly's Restaurant and Uno Chicago Grill both have fund-raising programs that target nonprofit groups, schools and churches.

A spokeswoman for Friendly's on West International Speedway Boulevard in Daytona Beach said student groups at nearby Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, so far, have been the biggest beneficiaries of the program.

Friendly's and a number of other eateries also donate dining certificates to area schools as rewards for students that do well.

Businesses that partner with nonprofits should be sure to identify a cause or agency that is in alignment with the interest of their customers, Galvin said. Customers who come in for the fund-raising event are likely to return weeks later.

"Nonprofits are very amenable to this idea," he said, but very few restaurant owners are proactive in this regard.

He said restaurants also can benefit from Internet blogs where customers can go and share their comments about the business.

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