

Successful Catering Begins With Research And Planning

By Diane Chiasson

The art of catering is becoming more widely received in the hotel restaurant industry. It's a risky business, but when done properly, it can get you and your hotel the exposure you always wanted in the foodservice industry while translating into direct profits for your hotel restaurant.

Planning is pertinent for both sides of your business. Make a detailed schedule and stick to it. You must plan your marketing and promotions to attract customers, in addition to deciding what food items and suppliers to use, staff to hire and how much money to budget. In addition to planning, a new caterer must have perseverance, organizational skills, a sense for business and a creative personality. Here are some tips on getting a catering business started in your hotel restaurant operation.

Know your competition inside out

When starting out with your new catering business, it is necessary to research. The greatest challenge in starting a catering business is establishing a client base. The first step is to ensure there is a market for catering in your area. There is no use spending a lot of time catering to an area where your services are not needed. Conduct a market survey to decide what types of catering services are needed in your area.

Consider factors such as family size and income, home ownership and population trends. You should also take

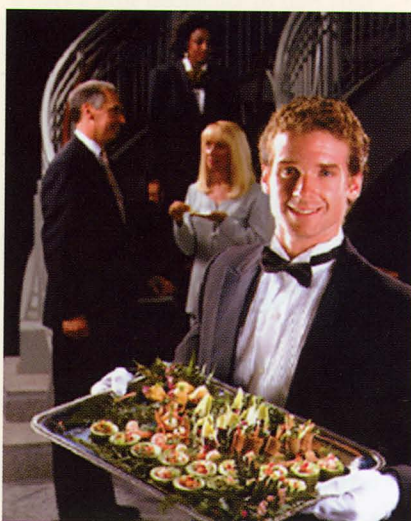


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note of different associations and organizations in your area. By doing this, you can get an understanding of what types of events you may be catering, whether it would be weddings, retirement parties, graduations, meetings, conventions or sports events. There are endless opportunities when you apply research to a hotel restaurant business.

Next, research your competition. Know who is in town, who has been in business the longest and who is just starting out. Grab a hold of their brochures and marketing and promotions materials and visit their restaurants to see menus. Examine their offerings in terms of service and cost. Decide what

these companies are all about and who is their target audience. It is equally important to know your competition's weaknesses so you can do amazing work where they are lacking. The Internet is also a great tool to do research on catering businesses and on your competition.

Budget breakdown

In the catering business you must make certain to have a budget for each specific event you are working on. By choosing the best suppliers and the most cost efficient food items, you should be able to tell clients right away how much their event will cost. Profitability is your main concern, so your budget has to reflect the needs of your catering business.

Create a mouthwatering menu

Creating the menu is the next important step to succeeding in your catering business. Since you most likely have a menu of items from your hotel restaurant, search for items you might want to see on your catering menu.

Choose items that will be easily accessible when the time approaches for planning an event. Items that can be made in advance are the most user-friendly, as they give the caterer more

preparation time on the day of the event. Because these items will be made in advance, be sure to select food that will last. Food items such as hor d'oeuvres and appetizers work well at catered events since these items can be prepared ahead of time, last until the event, and provide variety for the client.

Also consider the varied assortment of dishes you will be serving. Have a combination of hot and cold foods so people can pick and choose according to their tastes.

Take into consideration what type of event you are catering when planning the menu items with the client. If you are working a cocktail party, for instance, try not to serve something that requires a knife and fork — most likely there will be limited seating space for guests to eat. Finger foods would suit this type of event. Stick with simple recipes over complicated ones to avoid unnecessary headaches if one of the dishes does not work out in time.

Marketing madness

Creativity is key when marketing a new catering business. Since you probably don't have the budget to be placing billboards near major highways or placing commercials on television, it is important to come up with other strategic ways to get your word across.

Networking and word-of-mouth are principal aspects for capturing clients. Get involved with professional associations and organizations that provide seminars and information on starting and maintaining a catering business. Attending trade shows are also a valuable way to get to know the business and grab potential clients. Get in touch with your local chamber of commerce and professional organizations such as

meeting planners where you can make contacts.

Talk to your current customers explaining your intentions for the new path you are thinking of taking and see what they think. By involving your customers, it creates an opportunity for you to get your information across and encourage them to tell other people. Word-of-mouth is an amazing tool — use it to your advantage.

Be creative with advertising and promotions campaigns. If you own a restaurant, use the contacts you already have and send them a creative direct mail package. You should already know what type of food you will be serving, so use

this information to create a sample menu as part of the package. Have professional glossy photographs taken and include them along with scrumptious details of the food you will be serving. Make personal calls to ensure that your material has



Photo courtesy of ARAMARK Canada Ltd.

been sent to the right people.

Postcard campaigns are also effective because they are small, easy to use and get the word across without a lot of paper work. Have a contest as part of your campaign — the first 50 customers who call will get a discount or a sample package of the food you are offering.

Set up a section on your property with marketing and promotions materi-

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al, such as brochures, business cards and menus, along with glossy pictures of your menu items.

Keep in touch with who is new in town and send them a welcome food basket with samples from your menu and a business card.



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the spelling on your menu, it is necessary to plan the event in every detail. Tie up loose ends ensuring that transportation for the food is planned, proper food temperatures are taken into consideration, all additional equipment you need for the job has been

rented and your schedule is accurate.

Hire the best staff for the job

In addition to the delicious food you make, staff members are the people in your business who are going to make the biggest impression on customers. Make sure they are well trained, groomed and have the right attitude for the event you are working.

It is also essential that your clients know your staff's capabilities. Assess the needs of your kitchen staff, as well as the serving staff. This will give you a better understanding of staff expertise and will create a better flow of communication with your staff, and thus better communication with your clients.

Final details

Not enough emphasis can be placed on final details to ensure your catering operation will run without a hitch. Whether you are finalizing an event, or checking

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Editor's note: Chiasson Consultants Inc. has created a Catering Form to help foodservice operators starting out in the catering business. If you are interested in this form it can be forwarded to you — follow the contact information above.

10 Tips for Successful Catering

1. Make a detailed schedule and stick to it.
2. Conduct a market survey to ensure your services are needed.
3. Research you competition inside out.
4. Create a budget.
5. Design a menu using simple, but delicious recipes that can be made in advance and will last until your event.
6. Be creative with your marketing campaign.
7. Network, telling everyone you meet about your catering business.
8. Guarantee your staff is knowledgeable, well-prepared and have the right attitude.
9. Distinguish your capabilities and limits to prevent headaches.
10. Comb through every last detail.



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