

# Broadcasting FLAVOR

*New marketing ideas  
and good old grass-roots  
efforts are getting the  
flavor to the people*

Starting out in the marketing business, I had the good fortune to meet world-renowned business expert Dr. Gerard Egan, whose clients included The World Bank, the BBC, the United Nations and many others. He put me on the spot by asking the simple question, “What is marketing?”

After listening to me stumble around for a bit, he mercifully explained that marketing is the mechanism for learning what it is about your brand that makes it stand apart from all others; it’s why your brand deserves space in the community and what your brand is doing today and tomorrow to garner respect and build customer loyalty.

While his lesson struck me as both profound and simple; every day, I’m reminded that garnering space in

the community has become an increasingly daunting task in today’s overloaded media marketplace.

Consider who makes many of the dining decisions today. He, or more likely, she is running errands with two kids playing the punch-buggy game in the back seat. Clients are calling on her cell phone, and she’s trying to remember the grocery list as she moves through traffic like an Indy 500 driver.

She’s also thinking about where to order take-out for her family’s dinner. She’s struggling to decide what restaurant can possibly please her kids’ taste for mild white carbohydrates, her husband’s yen for spicy foods and her own craving for a healthy pile of leafy greens.

She may be listening to the radio in between kid’s music discs, but she probably didn’t hear anything that would influence her dining decisions for the evening.

If you think this hectic slice of life sounds dizzying, consider today’s younger dining guests and tomorrow’s decision makers — teens and “tweens.” A study jointly produced by Mindshare and Arbitron reported that more than 60 percent of teens said they regularly went online while watching television, to cite just one example of their fractured approach to media input.

On the one hand, this is impressive multi-tasking. On the other, how on earth can anyone get a marketing message through this din?

## QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶... Why mass-media messages can get lost in today’s cluttered minds
- ▶... Experiential marketing, grass-roots efforts, loyalty programs and other effective ways to get the word out
- ▶... Examples of winning media efforts by savvy operators

THEY PUT THEIR LIVES ON THE LINE.  
THE LEAST YOU CAN DO IS HELP SUPPORT THEM.



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ROCK BOTTOM RESTAURANT & BREWERY



FAMOUS DAVE'S



ROCK BOTTOM RESTAURANT & BREWERY

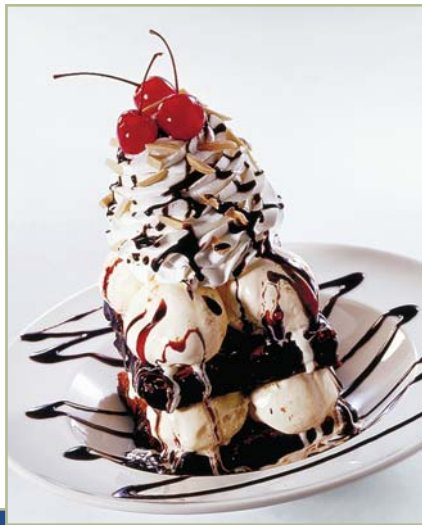
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Famous Dave's puts its barbecue flavor to the people with "drive-by ribbings" that deliver a direct tasting experience. Rock Bottom restaurants wins patrons' loyalty with its free Mug Club program, which offers rewards based on frequency of visits. The microbrew chain also gets involved with the community through its Fire House Ale, featured in an annual fundraiser for local fire departments.

## FADING TRADITIONS: MASS MEDIA

According to Bob Hogan, a legendary marketer at Avado Brands, the parent company for Hops and Don Pablo's restaurants, television and radio, "good or bad, remain the best way to reach large numbers of guests." He also acknowledges that, among other factors, rising media costs and the impact of ad-skipping technology are certainly making advertisers uneasy. Hogan admits that all advertising exists to bring customers into the restaurant or, as he puts it, to "invoke a visit."

But can those visits still be invoked by a television commercial? My own personal experiences and hunches tell me that the old bargains are not working. What's more, reports indicate that changing approaches to marketing are turning things upside down at hallowed advertising agencies in New York, Chicago and elsewhere in the country.

Multimillion-dollar advertising budgets are being slashed and redirected to new marketing methods devised to break through cluttered minds, build relationships with new customers and retain loyal guests.



The Cheesecake Factory, topping \$1 billion in sales, hasn't advertised in its 28 years, relying instead on positive word of mouth from satisfied customers.



## ENCOUNTERS OF THE PERSONAL KIND

One growing realm in the industry is experiential marketing. Pierce Promotions and Event Management, one of the leading experiential marketing firms in the country, describes its expertise as “a highly disciplined form of integrated event marketing that creates loyalty between consumers and brands through compelling personal encounters and sensory brand experiences.”

Almost the polar opposite of mass media, experiential marketing takes a message to the people in their own environment, offers them samples, delivers brand messages on a one-to-one basis from highly trained “brand ambassadors” and engages them in a full sensory experience, creating emotional connections between people and products.

In the restaurant business, a perfect example of experiential tactics comes in the form of Famous Dave's Legendary Pit Bar-B-Que. With more than 100 units in 24 states, the concept takes its barbecue flavors outside its walls in the form of “drive-by

ribbings,” as Lane Schmiesing, vice president of marketing at Famous Dave's, describes them.

Not your average sampling hand-outs, these tasting opportunities are finely orchestrated encounters involving teams of Dave's employees appearing in a fire-engine-red emergency vehicle, or “drive-by mobile,” fully stocked with ready-to-eat ribs and other menu offerings. “Drive-by ribbings” cruise around on the lookout for groups or gatherings, stopping to win over new customers by bringing Dave's famous rib flavors to the people.

“We use TV, radio and print at Famous Dave's,” notes Schmiesing, “but we are founded on grass-roots, neighborhood marketing.” The company knows that “to put a taste of Famous Dave's in peoples' mouths and deliver a slice of the Famous Dave's experience” is to use its marketing dollar to the best of its ability.

## FROM THE INSIDE OUT

While Famous Dave's has certainly created a fun, flavorful way to get its ribs to the people, not every operation has the resources to execute this. An easier variation is to conduct new-product sampling inside your walls, or consider other ways to extend your customers' experience with your food and concept.

Avado's Hogan is a big proponent of the “experiential on the inside” form of marketing. Instead of taking its flavors to the streets, Avado practices a more subtle science focused on creating great customer experiences that have a ripple effect.

Howard Gordon, senior vice president of business development and marketing at The Cheesecake Factory, one of the most successful operations in the industry, says the company has never advertised in its 28 years, relying instead on the best kind of public relations: strong and positive word of mouth.

“Guests of The Cheesecake Factory discover an 18-page menu with 200 choices and 50 desserts,” notes Gordon. “Our restaurants are in great locations, have an interesting ambiance, great food and generous portions.”

These factors, he explains, continue to create enough excitement around the brand, that the 91-unit chain has managed to become the “first chain to top \$1 billion dollars in sales and the first chain to become a mall anchor tenant.”

Targeted public relations and splashy grand openings also help the concept along. At the chain's recent Louisville, Ky., grand opening, four television channels, local newspaper and radio were on hand to meet founder David Overton and witness a state proclamation honoring the chain's arrival.

## GRASS ROOTS STILL TAKES ROOT

Rock Bottom Restaurant & Brewery, a concept based on the microbrew pub culture, also makes its mark without a lot of paid advertising, relying instead on good old grass-roots marketing connections.

“Rock Bottom has a family atmosphere and is very entrepreneurial,” explains Marilyn Davenport, the company’s marketing director. “We, of course, have a strong infrastructure and processes covering all of our locations, but our structure is also focused on ensuring that every single restaurant is important to the community.”

To that end, Rock Bottom has made a tradition of moving into existing buildings or using new construction to match the local surroundings. While this approach makes kitchen design more challenging, Rock Bottom sees major upsides to meshing with the fabric of the community. By being locally driven and different from market to market, Davenport explains, Rock Bottom is not thought of as a national chain.

Another way the company makes local connections is by naming their brews in ways that resonate with each restaurant’s locale. For instance, the company’s Desert Ridge, Ariz., location offers a Saguaro Stout, while guests in Long Beach, Calif., quaff Long Board Brown and Signal Hill Gold.

The company has also supported local fire departments for the last 10 years by brewing a specialty beer named Fire Chief Ale. The beer is part of an annual fundraiser that includes firehouse cook-offs, firefighter bachelor auctions and down-home events.

Recent guest surveys validate Rock Bottom’s local marketing positioning strategies. According to Davenport, one respondent said, “Rock Bottom is like my favorite pair of jeans — comfortable and relaxed. I feel good about being there.”

### JOINING THE CLUB: LOYALTY PROGRAMS

While not exactly cutting-edge marketing, loyalty programs can also be seen as a way to quantify grass-roots efforts, and are being used at increased rates by chains of all shapes and sizes.

Boston’s Back Bay Restaurant Group’s Preferred Guest Program has attracted more than 20,000 members to the company’s Atlantic Fish Co., Papa Razzi, Charley’s, Abe & Louie’s, Coach Grill and Joe’s American restaurants. That number is even more significant when you consider members pay a one-time fee of \$20 to join, and membership doesn’t entitle guests to regularly reduced prices or VIP seating.

What members do earn is a return on their investment in the form of a \$20 reward certificate awarded after three visits, regardless of their expenditure. And, because frequent visits are the goal here, for every \$300 spent, Preferred Guests earn a \$25 reward certificate.

Back at Rock Bottom, more than 100,000 guests have signed on to the Mug Club loyalty program. It’s free, and it treats guests to regular rewards ranging from a logo pint glass after five visits to the ultimate prize — a plaque in the Half Barrel Club — earned after 120 pints.

“The benefits of the Mug Club program are crafted to be very simple in nature,” explains Brian Lambert, loyalty-program manager at Rock Bottom. “The obvious benefits are automatically rewarding the best guests and driving frequency.”

Lambert also sees some advantages beyond the obvious, including learning the names of their best customers in order to converse with them personally and segmenting groups to effectively target offers and messages, making them relevant to individuals rather than sending mass communication.

The Mug Club puts a name to Rock Bottom’s marketing program and builds a family of people who love food and beer. Every marketer should be so lucky.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Successful operations are proving that the secret is not in mass-market messages but in the smaller, more personal connections. We have to work harder and more creatively than ever before to devise exciting and meaningful interactions, both inside and outside our restaurants. The success stories prove that the effort is well worth it. ☺

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#### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **EXPERIENCE IT:** Events, samples, drive-by tastings — consider getting your flavor out in new ways
- ▶ **CLUB IT:** The benefits of loyalty programs go both ways