

FLAVOR FACTOR

Foodservice could benefit from adopting reality television's marketing strategies



- ▶... Four lessons foodservice marketing can learn from reality television
- ▶... Ways to create reality-style excitement around your signature flavors
- ▶... Voyeurism, veto power and storytelling — how to put reality to work for you

Have you tuned into a network or cable channel during prime time lately? From what I can tell, the whole world has gone reality crazy. I recently read that there are more than 200 reality shows in production globally.

Call me crazy, but what's happening with reality television — the unbelievable buzz produced by each new reality series — is exactly what needs to be happening in foodservice. It's time to ignite excitement within consumers. Like reality television, where brawn is pitted against brains, in foodservice, pitting flavor against flavor will certainly create excitement, intrigue and interest.

WHAT IF THEY ACTED THAT WAY WITH MY BRAND?

The millions of finicky consumers who are anxiously glued to their sets each night to root for their favorite singer, ballroom dancer or other survival competitor are the same consumers we in the foodservice business are trying to influence. Can you imagine if these hungry consumers were to hang onto your product messaging the way they cling to every made-for-television moment?

Imagine if the pain they feel when their favorite reality contestants are tossed aside was felt when you replaced a menu item. And the loyalty! Following the silent departure of their dearly departed character into the shadows, instead of choosing a new reality show or, in our case, a new brand, they simply latch onto a new competitor and tune in again, week after week. This process is repeated until an ultimate victor is chosen. Then the really whacky stuff happens.

When shows go on hiatus for months at a time, loyal viewers visit reality show websites, message boards and

blogs, eagerly awaiting the return of their particular flavor of reality programming. When a new season finally starts, there they are, perched in front of their sets, ready to follow each new episode faithfully through to the end.

What the heck is going on? I'll tell you what's going on: Reality-show production companies, networks and cable channels are realizing impressive profits from the power of voyeurism and veto voting. These so-called reality shows aren't much more real than the sitcoms we've been eating up for years. They contrive mostly

unrealistic situations, let the cameras roll, and then heavily edit what they let us see. But whatever they are doing, it clearly works. It's time for foodservice to prosper from reality-style marketing, too.

THE REALITY OF FLAVOR

Reality-style marketing represents an ideal platform from which to connect with the finicky consumers whose loyalty we try so hard to capture and maintain. Imagine a show — or even a series of commercial-length vignettes — that merges the practice of cooking with the concept of reality programming. In fact, this has been done, but not completely effectively, and not with a real “flavor” focus. There was “The Restaurant,” featuring the apparent meltdown of Rocco DiSpirito: too many histrionics. Now there's Gordon Ramsay's “Hell's Kitchen:” too hellish. Of course, there's the “Iron Chef” cooking competition — full of drama, bravado and opinion — but featuring food combinations that many find a bit obscure.

How about something along the lines of “Extreme Makeover: Flavor Edition?” Operators big and small from all over the country could campaign to be selected for some divine kitchen intervention. Each week, two

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are chosen to tell their flavor stories, describe their menu dreams and work with R&D professionals to give some time-worn signature dishes a facelift.

After some tense moments involving failed recipes and flaring tempers, four official tasters would describe the results. These tasters would represent target consumers — four slices of mainstream America who represent the palates of the viewing audience. The first is a family man, the next is an energetic, health-conscious mom, the third is an athletic, outgoing twenty-something male and the last is a teenage girl with a cell phone pressed to her ear, seemingly uninterested in her flavor surroundings.

Once the tasters have their say, a team of marketing professionals swoops in to translate the flavor experiences into a multimedia advertising campaign, complete with digital and interactive media, local radio, table tents, signs, menu copy, server and crew-member scripts, newsletters, guerrilla marketing, website copy, e-mail messages and a massive public-relations campaign.

Finally, captivated Americans vote with their fingers, dialing in to choose the flavors they want to see on a menu near them.

Imagine the flavor stories that might unfold. One team might successfully retool an entire operation, shifting it away from fried foods and toward fresher, heartier and more wholesome offerings. In another segment, a group of on-trend research chefs apply the latest high-tech ideas to an otherwise humble family-dining chain. Or an Asian operation transforms into a French-Vietnamese fusion destination. Another night, two teams square off to devise new menu offerings for children, something to knock pizza and grilled cheese off the list of kid favorites.

In a reality flavor program, exotic flavors battle against trusted favorites. Flavors clash, and champions are chosen. More challengers emerge, and the flavor-reality-process continues. Participants and viewers will learn first-hand that when flavor is pitted against flavor, the boldest competitor doesn't always survive.

BACK TO REAL REALITY

One of the biggest challenges in marketing flavor lies in finding concrete ways to convey a highly personal and even conceptual idea to the masses. Short of supplying samples of your signature dishes to all of America, it's very hard to get those flavors into people's minds. Televisions don't waft aromas into a room, nor do they give you a real taste for anything. And yet, the entire reality concept has proven that anything — from executive make-up to being locked down in a house with a group of strangers — can be compelling, given the right elements. Let's look at how those elements could be practically applied to foodservice marketing.

LESSON 1: THE PEEPING TOM FACTOR

Reality programming hangs on the allure of having a window into real worlds, real struggles, real interpersonal relations and real work being done. These shows prove that we all have voyeuristic tendencies, and many foodservice operations have built on this appeal with open kitchens, creating a "dining-as-theater" atmosphere. Perhaps more significantly, the Food Network has become a huge success by building on one idea: People love to watch chefs in action.

The chef-in-action concept is a powerful marketing idea. In practical terms, this might mean getting your chef onto the local morning news to showcase a signature dish. Or make your chefs the go-to experts for using local ingredients. It could mean adding a videotaped cooking demonstration and recipes from your R&D kitchen onto your website. Or, on a grander scheme, an entire multimedia campaign could be built around the quest for the "right" flavors: the perfectly executed molten-chocolate cake or the most sizzling steak.

LESSON 2: THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

This lesson is a direct extension of the first, and it involves putting a face to a flavor. "American Idol" has proved that when it comes to picking the best undiscovered pop singer in the country, vocal abilities are a small part of what Americans consider. We also want pluck, personality, biography and narrative. We might like one contender because she has a great smile or another because he makes us laugh.

And, while I don't advocate taking this concept to the extreme, I do believe that showcasing your kitchen talent will help put a face to a flavor. People are interested in chefs, so show your chefs at work as much as possible.

LESSON 3: TELL A STORY

Whether it's the transformation of a plain Jane into a beautiful swan or the romance of marrying a rich prince or princess, these new reality shows tell good old-fashioned stories, and so can flavor branding. Consider the story behind Olive Garden's Tuscan menu items. They didn't just throw some rosemary into their recipes. They've established a Culinary Institute of Tuscany in an 11th-century village in Tuscany. Their chefs travel there to meet winemakers and shop for fresh herbs in Florence's markets. They meet local food experts and learn at the hands of Chef Romana Neri. They bring those authentic flavors home and feed them to America.

That's a best-selling story, and I'm sure your kitchen is full of them. If your chef travels to Puerto Rico and is inspired by the local food, send a press release to local media along with the new menu. In fact, send media-ready photos, web links and recipes. Don't wait for the media to discover your great flavors and expertise on their own. Make your own news, and get those flavor stories out there.

LESSON 4: VETO POWER

Whether voting for the next pop idol or rooting for the best schemer on "Survivor," we all like our voices to be heard. Think of how the Pepsi challenge became

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **TELL A STORY:** Some of your best menu items have great R&D stories behind them
- ▶ **MULTIMEDIA MOMENTS:** Plate shots alone won't convey your flavor message; strut your stuff on an interactive website

ingrained in our pop culture. It worked because consumers participated in a taste test — on television!

In reality television, votes are counted, and results have immediate impact on shows like "American Idol." In the multi-unit foodservice world, consumers vote with their feet, and it can take months for these lost votes to influence menus. Don't wait until you've done a complete rollout of five new signature dishes before you learn that they don't play well in Peoria. Use consumer sampling and testing early and often in the process.


Another easy way to put veto power to work in your operation is to ask for more customer feedback. Move beyond the usual "How would you rate your dining experience, on a scale of 1 to 5?" and start asking real questions about spice levels, crispiness, freshness and other flavor qualifiers that are important to your operation. Use this feedback in your menu development and in your marketing.

The time is now to start surprising customers with the reality of flavor. Static photos of styled plates with perfectly polished fruits, vegetables and grains are beautiful, but in the world of reality, consumers need more. I am a flavor addict, which makes me the perfect candidate for reality-style advertising. The day brands use stories, personalities, kitchen footage and a dose of reality to convince me that their smoky chipotle chili, succulent seasoned softshell crabs or fragrant butterscotch desserts can win the flavor factor, I will be the first to tune in. And the rest of the nation will join me. ☺

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to market
to market

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if a little's good, a lot's not
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