

Online Ordering

Seven Tips for a Successful Implementation

If you manage any restaurant operation, chances are that you have heard of, are considering, or already employ an online ordering system. This is because these systems have become quite easy to setup and maintain while often significantly boosting a restaurant's very profitable takeout business. Not surprisingly, *QSR Magazine* recently reported that of the Quick Service experts surveyed, 51% predict online ordering to be "The Next Big Thing."

Many restaurant owners make the mistake of believing that an online ordering system alone will lead to a successful online business. This is not the case. To truly thrive and be profitable, your online ordering system must successfully tie into your other marketing efforts. How much work you put into informing your customers of this new ordering method factors directly into how well this system will work in your restaurant.

Here are seven tried-and-true tips on how to make the most of your online ordering system.

1. If You've Got It, Flaunt It (in your stores).

What good is an online ordering system if no one knows about it? Having a system such as this is a testament of your foresight and constant efforts to better serve your customers. Wear this badge proudly by using traditional media to communicate your new service. Plaster your stores, mailers, TV ads, takeout boxes, e-mail newsletters, and even your employees with a NOW ORDER ONLINE! message. As Papa John's, Chipotle, LaRosa's Pizza and many others have found out, your sales will thank you for your marketing efforts.

2. Online Customers Demand Convenience.

Customers shop online for two reasons; convenience and price. Consequently, online ordering will be wildly successful in your locations if (1) you make it very simple to view CURRENT store menus and specials and (2) make checkout out convenient. Just like customers hate to wait in lines at a restaurant and want to know what the day's deals are as they sit down, they want their online ordering experience to be fast, intuitive, and convenient.

Make sure that your online ordering form asks for only the bare minimum of information, allows for easy reordering, is easy to navigate, and saves your customer's information so they do not have to re-enter it every time they come back.

3. Market to the Obvious Users.

Why should you expect your average online ordering check to be significantly higher than in-store? Because online ordering naturally caters to groups. Consequently, those who spend hours in front of the computer and routinely work in groups should be obvious customers for which to heavily market online ordering. Examples of such customers are employees of local businesses, hospitals, academic institutions, churches, etc. Chances are, if these customers order online from your restaurant once, they will stick with you for other group orders. Three chains with significant group lunch business, Subway, Pizza Pan and Chick-Fil-A, recently launched online ordering in their stores to capitalize on this phenomenon.

Promotions and mailers work best. Also, consider putting a “Drop your business card and win!” box in your locations. It is an easy way to get the contact info of your internet savvy business customers.

4. Spoil Your Online Customers.

Your online customers save your employees time and effort. It does not hurt to reward them with coupons or special treatment. Perhaps the best example is Chipotle’s marketing message DSL (Don’t Stand in Line). Customers who order online do not have to stand in line to checkout. Instead they go directly to the cashier to pick up their order and pay, cutting in front of those who did not preorder. Additionally, Chipotle gave out free burrito coupons at universities across America to insure that hungry college students would get hooked on their online ordering platform.

5. A Little Creativity Goes a Long Way.

You spend a great deal of time and money to make sure that your restaurant’s marketing materials do your brand justice and increase customer interest. Your website should be no exception. Insist that your online ordering company make your site creative, memorable and branded according to your restaurant’s message. LaRosa’s Pizza and Papa John’s have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to design sites specifically branded to their stores. Such expenditure, however, is hardly necessary to achieve this goal.

Rascal House Pizza, a Cleveland, Ohio chain, pays particular attention to their branding. Consequently, when they redesigned their online ordering website it was crucial for them to have a creative interface that gave their online customers a similarly memorable experience as stepping into their restaurants. They achieved this through artistically branded page headers that change as the user navigates through different pages on the site. Each professionally designed header conveys that Rascal House is a trendy, social, and clean atmosphere where pizza is “Best when shared with friends.”

6. Site Statistics are a Goldmine.

Every time a customer uses your website, an opportunity to collect useful data exists. How many customers use the site to order? What time are they most likely to order? What coupons do they most use? Where do they order from? How often does the average online customer order? What is the average check? Can this number be increased through different promotions? Your restaurant can achieve a whole new level of success by aggregating and utilizing the information that your site automatically collects every time a customer visits.

7. Your System Automatically Harvests e-Mail Addresses. Use them!

The customers who go online to order food from your restaurant will most likely want to know when your restaurant has a special or an event. Sending e-mail blasts is inexpensive, highly effective, and very simple. Moreover, it is a universal tool that will reach everyone in your target audience from the hungry college student to the busy professional mother. Keep in mind, however, that unless your e-mail newsletters or coupons have an unsubscribe option built in, they will be considered spam by your users and will be filtered out. Furthermore, make sure that your e-mail campaign management software has statistics that let you see how many people saw your e-mails and whether they worked.

In sum, to get the best return on you online ordering system investment; heavily market to your customers within your store and through e-mail, make sure your site is creative and easy to use, and utilize statistics to make sure that your advertising efforts are being amply rewarded with profits.

Stan Garber is a partner at O-Web Technologies, Ltd., an interactive media company specializing in online ordering solutions. Contact him at stan@owebtech.com or 440-785-2870 or visit www.eordermanager.com.