

# Restaurant experience is key to attracting young families

As millennials and Gen Z start families, restaurants have a number of strategies they should consider to capture their business

by Mark Hamstra

**T**he increasing degree of digital connectivity between restaurants and their customers is a double-edged sword when it comes to marketing to young millennial and Gen Z parents, according to some industry experts.

While digital channels provide opportunities for marketers to reach families with children, and technology can enhance their overall restaurant experience, many young parents are cautious about digital activities that involve their children, such as electronic games or other platforms that add to children's "screen time," said Jennifer Loper, president of Creative Consumer Concepts (C3), an Overland Park, Kan.-based marketing firm that specializes in families with children.

"Millennial parents want experiences," she said. "Digital can be part of the experience — but it has to be a thoughtful and very deliberate part of that experience, versus saying, 'Hey parents, here's an opportunity to stick a screen in front of your child so you don't have to interact with them.'"

At the same time, today's millennial and Gen Z parents have grown up using technology themselves, and they expect restaurants to offer tech-driven solutions that take the stress out of their

visits. That involves many of the tools that have gained traction during the pandemic, such as the ability to order ahead for pick-up or on-premises dining.

Attracting young families with children is becoming even more challenging amid rising inflation, which may be driving more families to dine at home, according to a recent report from The NPD Group. Traffic from households with kids under age 6 was down 8% in April, compared to April 2021, and traffic from households with kids ages 6-12 was down 9%, the research firm found. Traffic from adults-only groups was up 1% during the month, according to NPD.

## Eliminate 'pain points' for parents, kids

Restaurants seeking to attract young families need to focus on reducing all of the "pain points" that these customers can experience, Loper said. That could mean providing extra napkins without the customer having to ask, for example, and ensuring that the lids on kids' drinks are secure when they pass them through the drive-up window. It also means ensuring their kids' meal toys or other materials have been included.

"Operators need to be thoughtful about who their customers are as a family," she said.

Restaurants also should ensure that their menu is kid-



Texas Roadhouse leverages its community connections to help promote the brand to families.

friendly and that there are activities or entertainment for children, such as crayons, activity books or a play area, Loper said.

"Something that never changes about kids is that they want to have fun, and there are so many ways to

manifest that," said Loper.

Millennial parents are also interested in restaurant brands that are committed to causes and support their communities, and their children often also support these efforts, Loper said.

Texas Roadhouse, which

works with C3 on its family marketing, leverages its community connections to help promote the brand to families with kids, said Beth Franklin, manager of digital marketing for the Louisville, Ky.-based casual-dining chain, during a CREATE webinar hosted by



NRN earlier this year.

“A lot of things we do are not necessarily within the restaurant,” she said during the webinar, called “How Leading Brands Drive Sales by Winning with Families.”

Each restaurant in the chain has a dedicated local store marketer that forges connections in the surrounding communities, which can often involve the distribution of toys from Texas Roadhouse, Franklin said. The chain can distribute the toys to schools or police and fire departments, for example.

“They turn around and give the toys to kids, so we essentially have a business card for kids in their homes,” she said.

Raising Cane’s is another example of a chain that conducts kid-friendly activities in its communities, said Loper. The Baton Rouge, La.-based chain works with C3 on its Holiday Plush Puppy program, which allows customers to buy a plush toy based on Cane, the chicken-finger chain’s mascot, to support donations to no-kill pet shelters and other local pet welfare causes.

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— Giselle Campos, InnoVision

### **IHOP launches Minions Menu experience**

Providing an enjoyable overall experience for families is at the heart of IHOP’s new tie-in with the animated movie “Minions: The Rise of Gru.” The collaboration features a Minions Menu of eight new food and beverage options, offered for a limited time this summer.

The Minions partnership appeals to millennial families and enhances the in-restaurant experience as it encourages adults and their young children to visit IHOP restaurants, a spokesperson for IHOP told NRN.

The “Minions” collaboration overlaps with IHOP’s Kids Eat Free promotion, a dine-in only promo offered every day from 4 to 10 p.m., when kids 12 and under receive a free entrée from the kids’ menu with the purchase of an adult entrée.

The national creative campaign features minions mischievously descending on IHOP and trying the limited-time menu items, such as Ba-Ba-Banana Pudding Pancakes. The spot is airing nationally on TV, online and on social media.

The spokesperson said the campaign invites guests to fall in love with the new Minions Menu, in turn inspiring young “Minions” fans and their millennial parents to go to IHOP to try it out for themselves.

### **Huey Magoo’s leverages data to reach families**

One company that is taking a tech-savvy approach to marketing to families is Huey Magoo’s, the Orlando, Fla.-based chicken tenders concept.

InnoVision Marketing Group, which handles Huey Magoo’s creative advertising, leverages a proprietary solution that allows it to gather the phone IDs of customers who have visited any of Huey Magoo’s competitors in the past year.

“We can move into any mar-

Providing an enjoyable overall experience for families is at the heart of IHOP’s new Minions tie-in.



ket and create an automatic historical database of our competitor’s best customers,” said Giselle Campos, senior VP and senior creative director at InnoVision.

InnoVision can then refine this list even further, identifying families with children, for example, and then serving different ads for mothers and fathers.

“Our creative strategy for approaching moms may focus on the convenience of making Huey Magoo’s a quick stop for lunch after sports practice, while the strategy targeting dads may focus on bringing Huey Magoo’s home at the end of a long day for the whole family, and the third strategy for both may focus on the variety of options avail-

able for even the pickiest of picky eaters,” said Campos.

Young millennial and Gen Z parents are also interested in experiencing the “fun” of a brand’s personality, just as their kids are, she said.

“We make sure to address the different age demographics of the Huey Magoo’s consumer in a tone that is relatable and aligns with today’s social culture,” said Campos. “Just because both demographics are growing up and beginning to take on more adult roles does not mean that they are letting go of what makes them young at heart.”

InnoVision seeks to ensure that the creative aimed at millennials and Gen Z’ers for Huey Magoo’s is fun, whether that means introducing

share-worthy emojis or referencing popular TikTok audio trends, she said.

“We always communicate to them in their language,” Campos said.

Visually, InnoVision takes a lifestyle-driven approach that seeks to depict fun and excitement around eating chicken tenders. The advertising reflects the uniqueness of the brand and the quality of the chicken, using the chain’s newly registered slogan, “The Filet Mignon of Chicken.”

At the store level, the Huey Magoo’s menu has been developed to appeal to consumers of all ages, including tender combos for “Little Magoo’s” and family meals with 20 or 30 tenders, plus sides, Texas toast and dips. ■