What Families Want from Kid-Friendly Restaurants

4 Min Read | 9.12.2023 | By C3

The fast casual restaurant segment has seen tremendous success and growth in recent years. According to Circana, Inc./CREST®, while overall restaurant traffic was down four percent in 2022 compared to 2019, fast casual traffic was up nine percent

. But there's one area in which it can improve: with young families.

Why should fast casuals work on improving with young families? Not only is winning over kids important to building a fan base among future guests, but families with kids 12 and under bring in checks that are more than twice as high as parties without kids.

So, how can fast casual restaurants attract this valuable consumer segment to their restaurants? We specialize in kids and families in restaurants and conducted a study to find out.

Fast casuals have the food...

Parents would often rather go to fast casual restaurants with their families than quick service restaurants because they perceive it as higher quality and better-for-you, but their kids often ask for fast food instead. Why? Kids like the food AND they get a toy.

...But lack kid-focus.

It is evident to the parents we talked to that most fast casual restaurants don't focus on the kid and family experience. As one dad said: "So at the end of the day, there's nothing relatable to a kid [...] If they have something specific that stands out and says 'Oh, so [this fast casual brand] does focus on kids now.' Yeah, then I think they would get the [family] business."

Even for brands that have kids' menus, they're often de-emphasized on the menu board and lacking in options. In addition, most fast casual brands don't engage kids directly through packaging, messaging or entertainment.

The key ingredients to kid-friendliness:

Here are the top two things parents are looking for in a kid-friendly fast casual restaurant:

#1: Kids' meals. Eighty-five percent of parents stated that a kids' meal or kids' menu is essential to making a fast casual restaurant kid friendly. It signals to parents that that restaurant has food their kids will like. Kids' meals are table stakes. In addition, 52 percent of parents agree that a kids' beverage should be included in the kids' meal.

#2 Kids' give-aways (like toys/activities/coloring). These are the second highest items on the kid-friendly list, with 70 percent of parents agreeing that items that add fun and entertainment to a kids' dining experience – just like they've come to expect from fast food restaurants – are key to a good family experience.

These top two ingredients are followed by items that add to the kid-friendly atmosphere (like friendly employees and a place that kids can get a little noisy without getting dirty looks) as well as basics like kids cups with lids (that aren't too big and won't spill).

What's at the bottom of the list? Things that parents often try to steer their kids away from: desert (only 20 percent of parents say this is important to kid-friendliness) and screens (only 11 percent of parents say restaurant apps or websites with kids games is important to kid-friendliness). These items might work for some brands, but they are not essential ingredients to attracting families.

Why are kids' give-aways so important to kid-friendliness?

One of the opportunities that research revealed is for the fast casual segment to engage with kids directly. Kids' give-aways are a tool to achieve that. Not only do they improve the kids' experience of the brand, but they also improve parents' as well! According to parents, kids give-aways...

1. Are fun for kids.
2. Are something to entertain the kids while the adults have a conversation.
3. Are an exciting surprise for kids.
4. Encourage kids' creativity, imagination, and pretend play.
5. Make kids more excited about going to a non-fast-food restaurant.
6. Are something for kids to play with while parents eat.
7. Are something to entertain kids in the car on the way home (from drive-thru or take-out).
8. Are a small gift for the kids.

The business case for kids' give-aways

Parents have told us that they'd prefer to go to fast casual restaurants for the better-quality food and atmosphere, while their kids are usually pushing for fast food, in large part due to the toys they know they'll get from most fast-food restaurants. In other words, families want food and fun! The introduction of kid's give-aways would go a long way to help increase families' traffic to fast casual restaurants:

If a fast casual restaurant brand were to provide kids' toys or give-aways...

1. 90 percent agree: It would make that brand seem more fun.

2. 87 percent agree: Their kids would ask to go there more often.

3. 80 percent agree: Makes that brand seem like a better value for their family.

4. 79 percent agree: They would take their family there more often.

If you're a fast casual restaurant looking for the next level of growth, consider adding a kids' meals to your menu (if you don't already have them) and upping the fun level with an entertaining give-away that will benefit kids, parents, and your brands' traffic.

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C3 is a Kansas City-based marketing and design agency that brings brands to life for families with children through experiences and entertainment. C3 uses insights, strategy and expertise to produce award-winning programs and custom products to help major restaurant, hospitality and service industry partners connect with families wherever they are—in person, at home or in the community at large.

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