How to Boost Restaurant Customer Connections with Collectible Promotions

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In the ever-evolving landscape of restaurant marketing, brands are constantly seeking innovative ways to capture the attention and loyalty of their target guests. One trend that has gained significant traction in the restaurant industry in recent years is the use of collectible promotions to engage young adult guests, particularly Gen Z consumers. These promotions range from collectible figures to cups, stickers and plush toys. By offering these items as giveaways or purchase-with-purchase incentives, restaurant brands aim to drive traffic, increase brand affinity and foster long-lasting customer relationships.

Brands Targeting Grown-Ups with Collectibles

While collectibles have traditionally been associated with children's meal premiums, a growing number of brands are now targeting adult consumers with these engaging promotions. Fast-food giant McDonald's has been at the forefront of this trend, making waves with their Cactus Plant Flea Market Box in 2022 and the Kerwin Frost Box in 2023. Both promotions included highly sought-after collectible toys and drove significant traffic increases, demonstrating the powerful allure of collectibles among adult audiences.

Other notable examples include Starbucks' wildly successful Red Cup Day promotion, Raising Cane's limited-edition, celebrity-designed Post Malone cups and Dutch Bros' monthly sticker drops. These initiatives have not only generated excitement among customers but have also sparked conversations on social media and earned media coverage, further amplifying brand awareness and engagement.

The Power of Collectibles

To gain a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive collectible promotions from quick-service brands, C3, a leading design and marketing firm supporting the restaurant industry, conducted a survey among 400 Gen Z and Millennial adults in the U.S. The results were resoundingly positive, with an impressive 81 percent of respondents expressing that they "love" or "like" it when brands offer collectible items. Participants highlighted the unique ability of collectibles to evoke feelings of excitement, nostalgia and a stronger connection between customers and their favorite brands.

One respondent eloquently summarized the sentiment, stating, "Collectibles create a sense of excitement and nostalgia. They add an element of fun to everyday experiences and give me something to look forward to from the brand." This statement underscores the emotional impact that collectibles can have on consumers, transforming ordinary brand interactions into memorable and cherished experiences. The survey showed that collectibles can have a strong impact on brand perception: 71 percent agreed that collectibles make them happy and 62 percent said they make them like the brand more.

Collectibles also have the power to drive traffic: 76 percent agree that a collectible promotion "gets my attention" and a whopping 63 percent felt collectibles would entice them to visit or purchase from the brand.

The survey also shed light on the types of collectible promotions that resonate most with consumers. The top motivators included:

1. Free gifts with purchase

2. Items that are "just too cute" to pass up

3. When the proceeds go to support charity

4. Collectibles based on popular licenses, characters or celebrities

5. Limited time offers that create a sense of urgency

6. Yearly/seasonal promotions that become a tradition to look forward to

These findings provide valuable insights for restaurant brands seeking to craft collectible promotions that truly captivate their target audiences.

Crafting a Winning Collectible Program

To create a successful traffic-driving collectible program, brands should consider the following key strategies:

1. Tap into an existing fandom: Leverage the passion and enthusiasm of your brand's existing fans or partner with popular licensors to create collectibles that resonate with their dedicated followings.

2. Increase allure through scarcity: Build excitement and demand by limiting the availability of collectibles through time-sensitive offers, purchase requirements or exclusive access for loyalty members.

3. Encourage repeat engagement: Keep customers coming back for more by offering collectible series, intermittent drops and rare or ultra-rare designs that compel them to complete their collections.

The Secret Sauce: Why Collectible Promotions Work for Restaurant Brands

Collectible programs serve as powerful differentiators in a crowded marketplace. When restaurants provide unique, collectible products that can't be found elsewhere, they stand out from the competition and give customers a compelling reason to choose them over other restaurant brands.

Collectibles also have the power to generate buzz and drive conversations. The excitement surrounding limited-edition items, rare designs and seasonal promotions can make restaurant brands newsworthy, sparking discussions on social media and attracting earned media coverage. This organic word-of-mouth marketing is invaluable for brands seeking to expand their reach and engage new audiences.

At the end of the day, the effectiveness of collectible promotions lies in their ability to forge deep emotional connections with consumers. By offering tangible, joy-inducing items that customers can touch, feel and cherish, restaurant brands create a sense of exclusivity and belonging. Collectibles transform customers into brand insiders, intensifying their loyalty and enthusiasm.

Jennifer Loper is the president of *C3. C3 has over 37 years of experience in creating, manufacturing and distributing collectible products as part of meal programs. The team of experts can help brands launch tangible activations that not only appeal to target consumers but also reflect and amplify the brand's unique personality. By partnering with C3, brands can unlock the full potential of collectible promotions, driving repeat visits, fostering brand loyalty and creating lasting emotional connections with customers of all ages.*

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