



**25**

**Low Cost/No Cost**

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**Restaurant  
Marketing  
Guest Traffic  
Drivers**

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## 25 Low Cost/No Cost Traffic Drivers

When you ask someone what the best way to drive customer traffic to your restaurant is, the typical answers are always television ads, radio ads, newspaper inserts, coupons... and the list goes on and on of expensive advertising methods. While those have proven effective when used correctly in the past, it's a whole new ballgame today. Profits are down, budgets are tight, and investing in traditional advertising becomes a choice between advertising and feeding your family. That's why it's more important than ever to look at a different style of marketing which requires very little upfront investment, and results that are measurable and repeatable.

In creating the following list, I gave myself two requirements. First, it has to cost nothing or very little. When you're desperate to drive traffic, it usually means there's not a lot of extra money in the bank to buy a big advertising campaign. Secondly, it needs to produce results. If you're going to put your time and effort into trying to increase your traffic, it needs to put guests in the seats and profits in the register.

So now, in no particular order, I present my 25 Low Cost/No Cost Traffic Drivers...

### 1. Email Marketing

Email Marketing has many benefits. It can be done at a very low cost. It arrives directly in your customer's email box. And it produces results. The amount of people who open and read an email message is far greater than the amount who read all their junk mail in their mailbox. Plus, you're not paying for postage!

There are many services that offer email marketing to restaurants and other small businesses. The king in the restaurant world is Fishbowl Marketing. Other services include mUrgent and Constant Contact. But if you're on an extremely low budget, you can do it yourself. It is wise to use one of the email hosting services such as Aweber to manage your lists, so the labor-intensive job of confirming registrations and handling opt-outs is all automated. They

Since you are reading this message, I know that in addition to being incredibly smart and successful, you are also computer-capable and an email user. I don't have to tell you what a powerful communication tool email messaging has become. Not only is it convenient, it has become a very effective way to communicate with your customers.

Email is being used by more and more restaurants as a way to build a personal relationship with their guests. The typical method is to collect email addresses in exchange for signing up for a birthday club, restaurant fan club, or with an outright bribe of an appetizer or dessert to get the all-important email address of the customer. Once that address is in your hand, it's a very low-cost proposition to communicate with that customer on a regular basis.

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Your initial response may be, “I get too many emails already, why would my customers sign up for more ‘junk’ in their in box?” The best answer is to look at the success many restaurant chains are having with this. One nationwide chain recently started a program, hoping to have an average of 2,500 customers sign up per location in the first six months. After only one month, each location averaged over 3,500 customers! Your loyal customers really do want to hear from you.

To get started in email marketing, you’ll first have to decide which method you are going use to approach the task. I’ve broken the options into three categories – do it yourself, outside assistance, and really professional.

If you have a single location and don’t expect to build a large e-mail database, then perhaps doing it yourself will work. This could be as simple as collecting email addresses, and sending them an email when you have a new menu item or promotion going on. When you do a mailing, be sure to put all the names in your BCC: address box, which stands for “Blind Carbon Copy.” This will mail to those people, but will not show the huge list of addresses on top of your message. Not only does that list detract from your message, but you also would be sharing everyone’s email address with your whole list. Your customers have entrusted their address to you, so it’s your duty to keep it private.

There are road mines in doing it yourself, as the Internet Service Providers will “blacklist” an account if they think you are sending out spam. If you’re sending out hundreds of emails at a time, your account may run into trouble. Be sure to check with your provider to avoid trouble. I would not recommend doing it this way.

The next step up is to use an email service provider. These web-based companies house your list and allow you to do a broadcast e-mail to the entire list. Their mailings are “white-listed,” so you know they will go through. Many of them also offer the ability to do either text-based emails or html emails, where you can add graphics. These services also come with autoresponders, so when your customers send an email to sign up, they immediately get a reply that welcomes them. A few companies to check out include [www.getresponse.com](http://www.getresponse.com), [www.aweber.com](http://www.aweber.com), and [www.exacttarget.com](http://www.exacttarget.com).

Fast becoming the restaurant industry standard, [www.fishbowl.com](http://www.fishbowl.com) have become experts in providing email marketing. Check out their website for some great examples of email marketing in action. To use their services, it costs more than the first self-managed methods, but they help their clients do it in an effective manner that gets results.

When you compare the cost of sending an email versus the cost of direct mail, you begin to see an incredible cost savings. Restaurants are also getting a better return rate from email, because you know you are reaching your customers directly, and they have asked for your communications.

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## 2. Menu Engineering

Let's go inside your restaurant to examine ways to turbocharge the marketing power of the most important selling tool you have – your menu! This is where the customer decision can be influenced. It's the last sales opportunity you have before they make their final choice and place their order. As a traffic driver, you're trying to increase return visits by capturing the hearts and minds of your customers.

Different restaurant concepts have different types of menus. The following menu enhancing ideas can be applied in one way or another to almost any type menu – you'll have to decide which ideas work best with your concept. The underlying goal is to increase your check average and your margin. To do this, you'll first need to know what your margins are. If you sell a steak for \$15 with a food cost of \$8, and you sell a plate of linguine for \$12 with a food cost of \$4, you'll want to feature the linguine because when you do the math, you're putting an extra dollar in the bank every time the customer chooses pasta over steak.

Once you decide what you want to sell, there's a variety of ways you can guide the customer into making the choices you want them to make...

- List Management – All locations in a list are not created equally. Our eyes naturally look at the top item in a list and the bottom item, often glancing over the middle items in a list. Be sure to put the items you want to sell at the top and the bottom of your lists, and break up long lists into smaller ones so you don't have so many unseen locations.
- Box Featured Items – An easy way to draw attention to an item in the middle of the list is to draw a box around it. This has the added value of not only drawing attention to that item, but it also creates two lists out of your long list. You now have a “top” and “bottom” location in the list above the box, and a “top” and “bottom” location in the list under the box.
- Picture It – Pictures sell. If you have a quality photo of an item on your menu, it's a virtual guarantee that the sales of that item will skyrocket.
- Icons – Draw attention to an item with a little graphic. It can say “New” or “We're Famous 4 It” or just be a tiny version of your logo to signify it's your specialty. Any of these will make that item stand out from the others and make the readers eye stop on that line.
- Name It – Add some pizzazz to your menu items by naming them. Would you rather order “Oysters” or “Chesapeake Bay Oyster Platter?” By getting descriptive and creative with your names, it will enhance the sales of those items.
- Exclusive Creations – Customers love to order items that they believe are unique to your restaurant, especially if they can't experience the same thing at other restaurants. If you don't have something unique, try creating something new that you can claim as your own. Unique creations can command a higher price point, because customers can't do a price comparison, so don't be shy when it comes to pricing.

- **Emphasis Add-Ons** – Are there ways to enhance your normal plates, such as “add shrimp to your steak for \$2,” “Add Blue Cheese crumbles for \$1,” or “Add a second vegetable for 99 cents.” These add-ons are incremental sales that do wonders to your check average!
- **Create Combos** – Have you ever done the math on the combo meals at quick service restaurants? They usually have little if any discount to the price, yet they make it much easier for the customers to say “yes” to adding a drink and chips to their meal. Look for ways you can create a combo to increase your sales.
- **Feature other Courses** – Encourage your customers to order appetizers and desserts. Beverage sales are another add-on that increases profits. Feature these items in your menu, or make a separate menu that focuses on selling these items.
- **Price Increase** – It may be the most obvious way to increase income, although you always walk a fine line between an increase in income and a potential loss of customers. You can accomplish a hidden price increase by adjusting the items you offer on your menu. If you add some NEW interesting items that are higher priced and get the customers to buy them, you essentially have a price increase. To take this one step further, you could also delete some lower priced items, however you probably don’t want to take off popular items or you will have unhappy customers. If a low-priced item is too popular, try reintroducing your “New and Improved” version that has something added to it, which can justify a price increase.

And that wraps up a good list on ways to enhance your income by focusing on your menu. Print this out and put it in a file so you can be reminded to look at your menu every few months, to determine if you have new opportunities to increase sales through menu engineering.

### **3. Public Relations**

We’re going to investigate ways that you can tap into the power of the media without having the media tap into your bank account.

Have you ever thought about where all the news you read in the newspaper comes from? Many people assume there’s an army of reporters who cover the city every day searching for news. You may be surprised to find out how small that army really is. Much of what you read in the newspaper, hear on the radio, and see on television news began as a press release that presented the “news” to the media outlets.

Editors are always on the lookout for newsworthy stories. When you can get your restaurant featured in a media report, the cost is virtually nothing compared to buying advertising. Beyond that, the credibility factor is immeasurably higher because it’s a respected outside source talking about you instead of an ad where you are paying to talk about yourself. So the question is, how can I get media coverage?

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There's two steps to the process. It begins by figuring out what you have to offer as an interesting story. Everyday events will not catch their interest. If you have a sale on salads, don't expect front page coverage. But if you are introducing a Greek Salad and put together a press release that describes how Mediterranean diets are growing in popularity as people eat healthier, and your restaurant has answered this demand with a new salad, you have a better chance of getting noticed. Then step two in this process is to notify the media and get them interested in covering your story.

So what's worthy of submission to the press? Here's some ideas:

- **Community Support** – Involvement with a local charity is one of the best methods to get media coverage. If you hold a special event that raises money for the charity, it's a great opportunity for press releases announcing the event, inviting the media, and a wrap up release that tells the results. If you have an opportunity to get local celebrities to the event, it improves your chances of press coverage. If it's a visual event, like "Jog With Your Dog 5k Run" or "Pumpkin Launch For Charity," the television news crews are more likely to show up.
- **Human Interest Stories** – The media loves heartwarming human interest stories. Perhaps you hold a fundraiser for a child who needs a bone marrow transplant, or you throw a wedding reception for a military couple who were separated on their wedding day due to military service. If you watch the news and read the papers carefully, you'll begin to see a pattern to what type of stories they like.
- **Gimmicks** – This is the "happy news" that the media likes to use to amuse and entertain. Some good examples come from the pizza world, such as delivery of pizzas to the postal workers who stand by the mailboxes until midnight on April 15<sup>th</sup>. Also, Dominoes always releases a big "survey" around the Super Bowl about which type of pizza is ordered the most during the big game. They also release "news" about how many pizzas the White House ordered on election night.
- **Industry Opinions** – You can offer your services as an industry expert who will comment on issues that affect the restaurant business. This can be accomplished by building a relationship with the editors. Start with a mailing offering yourself as a resource, then give them a call and invite them out for lunch.
- **Grand Openings** – This can be effective in a couple ways. Business growth in a community is news for the business editor. Grand Opening events at white tablecloth restaurants can be news for the society, metro or food editor. Grand Opening events with wacky stunts (ie, anyone who arrives in pajamas gets a FREE "Eye-Opening Espresso") gets television coverage!
- **Management Changes** – Anytime you have management changes, send an announcement to the media that announce such things, like your local business journal. It won't result in major press coverage, but anytime you can get your business name in print in a positive light, it's worth doing.

- **Cooking Demonstrations** – Do you have a local morning television news/talk show. Many of them have cooking segments with local chefs. Offer your restaurant’s chef or representative to come in and present one of your signature dishes.

So now that you’ve created a media-worthy story, it’s time to get it in front of the editors. If you’re in a town with just a few media outlets, you can compile a list of contacts and send your press release out to each of them. Email is the communication method of choice for editors in this day and age. If you have many media outlets and multiple markets to cover, the internet offers a very easy way to distribute your news. For a small fee, you can distribute your press releases on [www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com) or [www.businesswire.com](http://www.businesswire.com). They both allow you to reach the region you want plus the restaurant trade magazines, or the entire country if you’d like. Once you sign up to become a member, it’s a very easy process to upload your file for distribution. Once it “hits the wire,” your story will be distributed to the editors, plus posted on a variety of news websites.

A solid public relations effort requires ongoing time and effort to find stories that are newsworthy, and to follow-up with the editors. If you start looking at your restaurant from a PR perspective, it can become a very effective marketing method that has very little cost.

#### **4. Sampling**

Sampling is all about putting your food to work as your salesperson, both in and out of the restaurant to increase sales.

Many restaurateurs got into the business because of a love for the food. The dream is that I’ll prepare food so good that customers will travel far and wide to come and enjoy my food. But if you’ve been in the business more than a week, you know that it takes more than just opening the doors and waiting for the customers to flood in. However, there is a way to put your food to work as the focal point of your marketing. It’s called Sampling.

Have you ever shopped at Costco? As you walk through the aisles, they have tables set up where “sample ladies” are preparing food for you to taste. They know that once you taste it, you often walk over to the display and buy it. And why do they do this? Because they know it works. We are driven by our taste buds. If it tastes great, we want to experience that flavor again. And that’s the special marketing power that your restaurant can tap into.

Sampling can be done both in-store and out in the community. The easiest place to start is in your restaurant. If you’re trying to grow your dessert sales, cut your tastiest dessert into bite-size pieces and hand them out as diners enter, or deliver them to the table to whet their appetite for dessert. The same can be done for appetizers, steaks, or whatever

item it is that you want to feature. The only real cost to this is the food cost. When you compare that to the cost of buying advertising, it truly is minimal.

Outside the restaurant offers a couple of sampling options. One of the most effective means of marketing is visiting area businesses and dropping off menus and a sample of your food. If you're a Mexican restaurant, maybe it's chips and salsa. A pizza place might drop off a pizza. Others may leave behind a bakery item. Whatever it is, your food makes a great calling card that will leave behind a good taste in their mouth about your restaurant. This type of on the street, business to business marketing can have an immediate positive effect on sales, as you pick up business lunch orders and catering opportunities. The largest roadblock to implementing this is lack of time, so for the best results it needs to be planned into the schedule every week. For instance, build a couple hours into the manager's schedule every Tuesday afternoon to go to five businesses and drop off your sampling package. With this simple schedule, you will have reached 260 businesses over the next year, and how many employees work at each business? 10? 50? 100? You can do the math and see the potential exponential impact.

Another sampling opportunity is to participate in community events by setting up a pop-up tent and booth where you provide samples. From sporting events to art shows to school carnivals, the events are endless where you can connect with your community. Some businesses have gone so far as to outfit a trailer or RV with all their gear and signage, then simply drive that to each event and are self-contained, ready to cook and sample.

Sampling, it's a way to put your marketing into the mouths of your audience!

## **5. Fund Raisers**

Next we're going to discover how you can put "profit" into "non-profit" opportunities.

Restaurants are a prime target for donation requests. Every worthy cause from schools to churches to community groups, plus a few not-so-worthy people, contact your restaurant to request donations. There are ways to turn these requests into business-builders instead of a budget busters.

First off, cash donations are the last thing you want to offer. Cash is king, and once it's out of the drawer, it's out the door. By using only gift cards or certificates as your donation, you've cut your real expenses to only the cost of food. So instead of a \$50 cash donation which obviously costs \$50, the same quantity in gift cards may only cost you \$12 in food cost. For the recipient, it has the same perceived value, but to your bottom line, you've saved a large percentage.

Better yet is to find ways to drive more business to your door everytime you make a donation. One of the best ways to do this is to hold a community night. For example, the

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church youth group comes to you and requests a donation for their mission trip. You say, “Hey, I’ve got a way that you can increase how much I give you.” To do this, you specify a day as the Church Youth Group day, and they get a percentage of sales from that day. You provide them with flyers that advertise the day (typically one of your slowest days of the week), and they distribute those flyers to everyone in their church plus all their friends, relatives and neighbors. This drives traffic to your restaurant on a day that was slow to begin with, and you make your donation (tax-deductible) based on the percentage of sales for the day.

If you need to limit this offer, you can either specify the hours it is for (Tuesday 4pm to 8pm) or you can require they bring in the flyers and you only donate for the meals sold to customers with flyers. Some restaurants make this a major part of their community involvement efforts, and have a different group participating every week.

Another way to turn donations into customers is to donate in exchange for marketing to the organization’s mailing list. Each non-profit group has an extensive mailing list of those that have donated to them. If you can send menus, coupons, etc. to their list or offer some sort of cross-promotion with the organization, you’re reaching a very receptive audience.

By approaching donation requests with a creative outlook, you can find ways to turn a cash drain into a business building opportunity.

## **6. Gift Cards**

It’s the gift that keeps on giving – that is, Gift Cards and their place in your marketing plan. The most successful promotions for gift cards are tied to holidays. Obviously the biggie is Christmas with the highest volume of gift card sales, but you can also promote them for Valentines Day, Birthdays, Anniversaries, Secretaries Day, Graduation, Mother’s Day, and any other occasion that people purchase gifts for.

At Christmastime you’ll see plenty of competition from other restaurants who are also promoting their gift card sales. So how do you compete? By making your gift card more appealing than their gift card. Many locations do that by adding a gift for the giver, such as “Buy \$100 In Gift Cards and Receive a \$10 Gift Card for Yourself!” These types of promotions provide additional incentive to customers to make the purchase.

The beauty of strong gift card sales during the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter is that it will help your sales in January and February when sales are typically slower for most restaurants. The more cards you can get under the tree, the better your first quarter sales will be!

## **7. Hidden Discounts**

Tap into the fact of human nature that people can't resist the idea of getting something for nothing. It's the lure of winning that makes contests and lotteries so popular. But you need to do it with a twist, to make sure they have to come into your restaurant to see if they're a winner.

Send out postcards that have a sticker or scratch-off portion on it, under which is printed a discount for dinner at your restaurant. The catch is that they can't peel it off to see the discount. Only their waiter can peel it off the next time they visit. The discount can promise 15%, 25%, 50%, and even 100% Off their meal. The curiosity of not knowing what's behind the sticker, plus the potential to get dinner for FREE, are strong motivators to bring the card in to find out what it's worth.

## **8. Job Fair**

So the economy stinks and many of your customers are unemployed, do something about it and be the hero! Invite the state's employment division and local companies to set up a job fair at your restaurant. If your location can't handle that many people, just create a Food Service job fair. Invite area restaurants (yes, even the competition) to set up tables where they will accept applications and interview prospects. This will show your community spirit, as well as the support of our industry during troubled times. Local media will be glad to help you get the word out about your job fair!

The side benefit to this is that you might find some new employee gems in the process. When the job market is weak, it's the perfect time as an employer to lose the losers and hire the winners. Quality employees will also help drive traffic, as customers will enjoy a much better experience as they dine at your restaurant.

## **9. Speed Dating**

Are you familiar with speed dating events? They are very popular and can fill your restaurant for a few hours. Participants sign up, then as the event starts they spend a certain amount of time at each table, such as 3 minutes. They make their quick introductions to each other and see if a connection is made for a real date later. After a couple minutes, a bell rings and they have to move on to the next potential date.

There are groups that put these events together, or you could plan one yourself. A little marketing to put the word on the street, and you could have an eager crowd filling your restaurant. During the speed dating event the participants don't have time for a meal, but the idea would be for them to find their match and stay for dinner. You could also expect to sell a lot of drinks to the participants, just to take the edge off!

## 10. Media Partnerships

When you hear “media”, your first thought is probably “how much will this cost me?” While that’s a legitimate question, there are ways to partner with the media without investing in a huge advertising campaign. For example, newspapers are desperate for increasing their circulation, so they are very open to promotions that are tied to new subscriptions. It could be as simple as an offer to sign up for a subscription and receive dinner for two at your restaurant. I’ve seen this promotion where the newspaper prints rack cards that go on front of every newspaper machine in town, advertising the promotion and your restaurant. The only cost to the restaurant was the food cost of redeemed certificates.

The other opportunity for low cost media is to feed the local disc jockeys. Providing food to the on-air staff is often good for some free plugs on the air, as they talk about the great food they’re enjoying. You also may be able to get some promotion in exchange for gift cards, as most stations have ongoing trivia quizzes or contests that are always in need of a steady stream of prizes.

## 11. Customer Database

The most important thing you can do is to create a customer mailing list. If you don't have one started already, begin immediately. With a simple "Enter To Win" contest that gives away dinner or a bike or anything else, people will gladly write their name and address on the entry form, and you have the beginnings of your mailing list.

Once you've collected your list, use it. You cannot get a more targeted advertising method. These are people who have visited before, so there's a strong likelihood that they're willing to come back. Give them a reason to return. Make the offer appealing, and stay in contact with them regularly.

If you can also collect their email addresses, do that as well. Sending an offer through the email is essentially free. There's no printing, no postage, just a little time on your part to create a good reason for your customers to hurry in.

## 12. Progressive Frequency Card

You’re familiar with a normal frequency card – buy 10 get 1 free – or some similar offer. While that’s good for building customer loyalty, what it’s lacking for building traffic fast is urgency. Instead you can create a short-term frequency card. The timeframe you choose will depend on what the normal time frame is between visits for your customers. For example, a customer visits on Saturday and receives your progressive frequency card

which you date and is valid for the next two weeks. On their next visit they receive a 10% discount. The second visit they receive a 20% discount. And the third visit within two weeks they get a 40% discount.

You can choose the amounts that fit your concept, but I think you'll agree that if you get your customers to return twice as often as they usually do, it will do good things for your cash flow.

### **13. Happy Hour**

Happy Hour is not just for bars and pubs anymore. You can drive sales by creating your own happy hour no matter what type of concept your restaurant is. A prime example of this is Dairy Queen. You certainly don't think of them as a place for a happy hour, but when they introduced a beverage happy hour from 2pm till 4pm, it helped their sales. Those were typically slower hours, so the additional traffic from discounting more than made up the loss from the discount itself.

Happy Hour doesn't have to be all about beverages either. There's a little restaurant in the south that offers a pie and coffee happy hour. In the middle of the afternoon, the place is packed with people enjoying their pie and time of conversation.

Seniors are another great group to target with a happy hour promotion. It's true that many seniors like to eat their dinner early. By giving them a reason to come to your restaurant, you'll increase sales and have one table turn done before the dinner rush even starts.

### **14. Social Media**

One of the hottest and most effective marketing tools right now is Social Media on the internet. The term covers sites such as Twitter, FaceBook, My Space, and many others. For example, let's look at Twitter. It's a site where your friends and fans can sign up to "follow" you, which means they receive all your "tweets" or posts you make online. These posts have a limit of 140 characters, so the idea is that these posts are short and sweet.

How can this be a marketing tool? One great example happened recently when a comedian wanted to practice some new material. He sent out a tweet to his followers, saying he'd be in a local park that night, performing a free concert on the bandstand. He expected 50 to 100 people would show up. It turned out that his tweet was forwarded from friend to friend of people who were in the area, and over 3,000 people filled the park. The police came for crowd control and it became a big incident.

And that's the power of social media. People telling people about things they are interested in. It's immediate. It's effective. Imagine a night when your reservation book looks really empty. Send out a message to your social media network saying the next 10

people to call to book a reservation for tonight receive a free dessert. The phone will ring, and there was no advertising cost involved to drive the traffic.

## **15. Prix Fixe**

A prix fixe menu is simply a collection of pre-determined items presented as a multi course meal at a set price. For instance, one evening, a restaurant may offer a prix fixe menu of escargot for the first course, beef bourguignon for the second course, a cheese platter for the third course, and crème brûlée for the dessert course. Most Parisian restaurants will actually offer two or three prix fixe options to diners.

As a traffic driver, a Prix Fixe menu is attractive because consumers can know what their price will be. If they perceive it as a value, it will drive traffic. Another option is to provide a set price for 2 diners. You could promote it as “Date Night!”

Some cities have seen Prix Fixe promotions among many restaurants, where they all team up to offer specially priced menus for a week and promote the special “go out to eat” week to help the whole industry.

## **16. Retro Rollback**

In today’s economic environment, you could attract a lot of attention by having a price rollback. Great for celebrating an anniversary, you could roll back prices to a certain year, and create a whole theme celebration. Imagine a retro week when your burger prices are the same as a burger in 1963, then your staff dresses in tie-die t-shirts and you decorate the dining room with psychedelic posters.

You may say, “but our restaurant isn’t that old.” You don’t have base it on the age of your restaurant. Find something else to celebrate. Your town just turned 50, your grandmother just turned 90, the city water tower just turned 30. The ‘excuse’ to roll back prices can be based on anything. Just make it fun, and your customers will enjoy it.

## **17. VIP Wine Tasting**

Special events are fun, create excitement among the staff, and create awareness of your restaurant not only during the event but from the buzz you create as participants talk about it for days to come. Consider creating a VIP event for your best customers, or one you sell admission to.

One idea is to have a wine tasting event. Work with your local wineries or distributors to provide some very special vintages for your customers. This event could be just wine and hors d'oeuvres, or you could make it a very special complete dinner.

## **18. Official “Fill In The Blank” Day**

When you hear it’s Official Pancake Day or National Ice Cream Day, do you know who officially declared it to be on that day? Usually a company looking for some promotion, and there’s no reason you can’t invent your own official day.

This works really well when it’s tied to a charity. IHOP has done it with National Pancake Day, raising millions for the Children’s Miracle Network. They based their day on some history with Fat Tuesday and Mardi Gras, and that’s always good if you can tie in your official day with something historical to add legitimacy to the event.

Another example is the ice cream business. In 1984, Ronald Reagan proclaimed July as Ice Cream Month, and all the ice cream stores from Baskin Robbins to Cold Stone to Ben & Jerry’s celebrate with promotions each summer.

You can be assured the President didn’t just decide on his own to declare July Ice Cream Month. Some business or dairy lobbyist asked him to do it. You can do the same locally, by having your mayor or city council declare an official day for your promotion.

## **19. Park and Ride**

What’s the big game in your town? Whether it’s college football, professional basketball, or another sport, the biggest pain of attending is fighting traffic and dealing with parking. That’s where you can become the hero! Offer a bus from your restaurant to the big event. Customers come and eat prior to the event, then get on the bus to the big game. Then afterwards, they’re delivered right back to your restaurant for their post-game partying.

Another variation is to offer a bus up to a ski area. Customers come for breakfast, then head up to the slopes for the day. Of course this plan works best if you have a big parking lot with available space for their parked cars, plus space for additional customers you get during the day.

## **20. Local Product Introduction**

Local sourcing of ingredients is a popular topic these days. Tap into the power of the “local” movement by offering items that have local products in them. While this might seem easiest for a white table cloth restaurant, it can actually be done in any concept. In the Northwest, the Burgerville chain of fast food restaurants has done a great job of this, offering seasonal promotions based on local sourcing. These include “Walla Walla Onion Rings,” “Oregon Hazel Nut Milkshakes,” and “Northwest Marionberry Shakes.”

With the local angle, it will make it easier to get coverage from the local media. They love stories about companies that support the local farmers. Team up with your suppliers and look for opportunities for news coverage, or appearances on local tv talk shows or radio shows.

## **21. Birthday Club**

This may be part of your email marketing or your customer database, but it's another classic way to drive traffic to your restaurant. Offer a free meal to your customers on their birthday. This is a natural as birthdays are a typical time when families go out to a restaurant to celebrate, often with a larger party than normal.

It's best to collect the customer's information, then mail or email their FREE Certificate a couple weeks before their birthday. The downside is that it takes time to build this database of customer birthdays and contact information. An option to start immediately is to promote the 'FREE Meal on your birthday,' when a customer shows their drivers license to prove that today is their birthday.

## **22. Kids Eat FREE**

Choose a night that's not usually busy, and offer Kids Eat Free. This is an age-old promotion in some categories, especially family dining. It drives traffic because families are always looking for ways to save money, especially now more than ever. It works for the restaurant because the fine print requires a meal purchase by the parent.

The key to driving the most traffic is to get the word out in the community. Start with your own customers, and you can be assured that moms talk to moms and the word will spread. You could also do coloring pages that promote it, and provide those to local schools and daycares for some additional marketing.

## **23. Exterior Banner**

It's a simple idea, not very unique or complicated, but it can be effective. Add an exterior banner or A-frame sign to the front of your business. It can promote some offer or new menu item. Be sure it's placed in a way that's very visible to all going by. Sometimes instead of hanging banners on a building, it's more effective to put them on stakes in the ground. It's all about attracting attention and getting people to notice you.

Of course many cities have sign codes and have rules regarding exterior signage and banners. Sometimes you have to pay to get a permit, and it's only good for a certain number of days. You know your city better than anyone else, but sometimes it's better to just hang it until someone complains, because it's easier to get forgiveness than permission.

## **24. Customer Referral Card**

Put your customers to work as your marketing team by creating a customer referral card. Here's the scenario... Your customer takes the postcard size card, writes their name and address on it, then gives the card to a friend. The card is good for a discount or free appetizer or some other incentive for the friends to come in and eat. When they bring in the card, you validate it and mail it back to the original customer, who then can bring it in for the incentive you offered them.

Word of mouth is the best advertising, and this provides a way to get your customers to talk about your restaurant. As they provide the discount to their friends, they'll also be telling them about their experiences with you, and recommend your restaurant to their friends.

## **25. Ask Your Customers**

While we've presented a lot of great ideas to help drive traffic for a low cost, the best answers may be sitting out in your dining room. The best way to motivate your customers is to know your customers. If you have a true understanding of who comes to your restaurant and why they choose you over the competition, it will be easy to craft effective promotions.

A great example of this is Burger King. They were struggling against McDonalds until they clarified who their number one consumer was that they were targeting. Their answer was in young men in their teens and twenties. All their edgy marketing, including the plastic King, the Subservient Chicken website, and cool television ads, were all crafted to connect with their target audience. It worked, and the chain turned around their sales results.

Know your customers. Talk with your customers. And then you'll figure out how best to motivate your customers to return.