

Are You Connected?

I am not talking about high speed internet or some affiliation with organized crime here. I am talking about a relationship or connection with your customers, or your potential customers. In the past, making a connection with your customers was easier. There were far fewer restaurants to choose from and people stayed pretty close to home. Most of these restaurants were locally owned and operated so when someone walked into your door there was a good chance that you recognized them from church, school or from another business just down the street. The owner or manager was out front and called these people by name and asked how their kids were. You were connected.

Today, people are more mobile and transient so they are more willing to expand their forays for food further from their immediate neighborhood. They eat more meals away from home and look for more variety in types of restaurants and cuisine so they do not get bored. This has led to a huge expansion in the number of restaurants or eating locations, many of which are national chains with little or no connection to the community.

People have also changed how they interact with their communities. Real personal contact between people has been exchanged for texting, e-mails, cell phones and other digital means. A person today may have numerous daily contacts with people that live in another state, but never talk to their next door neighbor. Many people now consider themselves more a part of the global digital community than the local streets where they live.

National chains actually win from this local disconnect because they create a false sense of familiarity and connection by using a consistent theme and feel to their restaurants and menu. TV and radio commercials, jingles, web-sites, and print ads give people the sense that they know what to expect from these establishments. These

communications are intended to create a connection between the consumer and the brand being promoted. Today, many people are willing to sacrifice a little on food quality or service because of the connection that is developed to the brand. National chains do not rely heavily on word of mouth to generate new customers.

So, what do I do if I don't have the resources to promote my brand on the TV, radio, and billboards? The simple answer is communication. In order to connect with people today, we need to communicate with them where they are now, online in these digital communities called Social Networks. Places like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Foursquare, YouTube, Gowala, and many more offer places for people with things in common, a space to gather online. Most of these sites also allow businesses to participate in the networks and communicate with those people that might be interested in their products and services. Social networking sites generally do not charge for this, but the communication will take some of your time.

Every restaurant owner knows how important it is to create and retain loyal customers and have them help to promote their establishment. Customers become loyal customers when they feel like they are part of the business, an "insider". You can promote this feeling of connection by listening and interacting with your customers. In future articles and at the Profit U seminars, I will explore some of the high tech and low tech ways for you to do just that.

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