



TRENDS TO WATCH POST COVID-19

MAY 5, 2020

It's evolution, not pivoting.

It may be just me, but the word “pivot” has been significantly overused during the past few months.

“Pivot”, to spin on a point or axis, may be what operators were doing as they shifted from business as usual to survival mode.

What we need to focus on, however, is evolution. The industry needs to evolve into our new reality to meet changed consumer needs and behavior.





2020

2019

2018

It's safe to say no one thought this year was going to head in this direction, but with every unexpected twist and turn is the opportunity to re-evaluate and evolve. As the news consistently improves, the industry can finally focus more on the future.

TRENDS TO CONSIDER AS HOSPITALITY REOPENS



Hedonic Adaptation

Hedonic adaptation, or the tendency to return to a stable level of happiness despite extremely positive or negative events, is likely behind the steady increase in consumers ordering delivery/ take out away from home since the beginning of the crisis.

This adaptation can lead to consumers sticking with delivery/ take out as the new normal.

As such, operators need to give consumers an extreme positive event or reason to break with their currently stable level of happiness, drawing them into the restaurant either for increased visits or on-site dining.

Celebrations, reopening ceremonies, and other events can help to break the current cycle of hedonic adaptation and lure consumers back with the desire to increase their current happiness levels.

Focus on promotions that offer consumers excitement, an experience, joy, or some other benefit for them. Remember, dropping prices or price-based promotions are not the only way to attract customers and don't create the same bumps in happiness that other programs may.

A person's silhouette is shown in profile, looking out over a vast cityscape. The city is densely packed with high-rise buildings, and a body of water is visible in the distance under a bright, slightly hazy sky. The person's hair is dark and appears to be blowing in the wind. The overall mood is contemplative and nostalgic.

Science of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a powerful emotional response, often associated with foods, frequently leveraged by foodservice operators in multiple ways.

Science has shown that nostalgia counteracts loneliness, boredom and anxiety, at least one of which most consumers have experienced during the lockdown.

It's suggested two types of nostalgia exist: 1. making people feel young, innocent and secure, and 2. transporting people to a happy, secure and longed-for "elsewhere".

Understanding that nostalgia does not need to incorporate candy and other kitschy child-focused elements or flavors to effectively capture nostalgia is important. Therefore, most operators should be able to innovate against the concept of nostalgia by leveraging one or both definitions as appropriate to an operator's brand and menu strategy.

Increasing Time Affluence

Though often not a concept consumers can articulate, time affluence contributes more to individual happiness than does financial affluence.

Time affluence is something restaurants can help individuals achieve and something many consumers may have unexpectedly found themselves short on during the lockdown.

Convenience has often been a key message for restaurants, but rarely is it effectively tied back to the idea of time affluence or the time consumers gain back by not cooking, shopping for ingredients, etc.

Though time affluence communication should not outweigh communication focused at building confidence and addressing underlying fears, it can be a powerful message for consumers who may want to gain back more of their day particularly as we head into the summer months and return to work outside the home.

A person wearing a green uniform is holding a brown tray. On the tray, there is a clear glass with a red straw and a metal spoon. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor or semi-outdoor restaurant setting.

Rise of Restaurant Staff

Staff quality has always been a key element to a successful restaurant but in the post COVID-19 age staff will be more important than ever.

Contributing to visual sanitation and food safety cues as well as communicating enhanced sanitation and safety measures will be among their most critical tasks.

There will be an ongoing tension between reducing staff costs, limiting staff in the face of reduced traffic, and the need to increase staff to accommodate new roles and responsibilities.

Though many restaurants eliminated the role, busboys are likely to experience a comeback and play a key role in helping dine-in restaurants maintain more rigorous sanitation standards.

Perhaps more than anything else, staff will be on the frontline of offering returning patrons true hospitality which consumers will have missed after limited social contacts. Hospitality will be even more emotionally impactful given the greater sense of community and lingering concerns about venturing into public spaces.



The Breakfast Comeback

Breakfast has been particularly hard hit in hospitality after years of consistent growth. Bringing back this daypart will be key given its, typically, higher profit margins.

Despite innovation in recent years that opened consumers to unique new flavors and formats at breakfast, consumers are likely to retreat into habit-driven behavior during this daypart more so than any other.

Focus on the most popular items pre-COVID-19 and keep innovation relatively close in to those best selling options.

For operators without drive thrus, facilitating fast visits with pre-ordering through apps, etc. will be critical. Focus on solutions that eliminate crowds or patron bunching during morning rush periods.

Though all day breakfasts were largely abandoned to reduce back of house complexity during the crisis, some elements of the breakfast menu may be brought back as traffic increases (again, focusing on the most popular items first).

Don't forget coffee beverages can be some of the strongest draws for the breakfast daypart and work well for afternoon breaks or with lunch. Promotions pairing popular coffee with items outside breakfast can help consumers return to normal.

Entrée Resurgence

During the last recession, handhelds enjoyed increased attention, but that trend may not play out in the same way during the coming recession as consumers will be drawn to items that mesh with their heightened sense of community and pent up demand for social connectedness.

Though dishes that encourage sharing may fly in the face of concerns about high touch items, playing with pre-portioning of larger sharing sizes while serving in a community-oriented way can create that sense of interacting without contamination issues.

Shifting formats or plating may be most challenging for some authentic world cuisine operators but consumers are likely to forgive some inauthentic plating in the short-term.

Family or shareable sizes also create portion-focused value perceptions which could be attractive to groups looking to dine out but facing economic hurdles.

Family sizes have proven extremely popular with consumers ordering take out/ delivery during the crisis. Operators for which these types of offerings make sense operationally and financially should continue these offerings for the short and mid-term. Other operators should assess whether this type of service makes sense going forward.



At Home Cooking/ Baking Impact

Though consumers may not cook and bake as much post crisis, the knowledge gained won't be lost but rather is likely to heighten their interest in and awareness of craft, preparation, ingredient quality and the difficult of making certain dishes. Operators can use this to their advantage in images, descriptions, and promotions.

Many operators have created variations on the DIY kit for delivery and takeout. Interest in these options – ranging from fully scratch to elements created by the consumer – is likely to continue.

Operators should assess how they can incorporate DIY options into both on-premise and off-premise offerings as appropriate to the concept and brand strategy. Any iteration must incorporate appropriate sanitation considerations either on an individual or group basis.

Tablesides service was on the rise prior to the crisis, and this can serve – for those operators with the staff and expertise – as a moderated DIY option that allows for interaction without contamination concerns.

Consider how recipes, on-site classes, virtual instruction and other forms of education may allow and operation to leverage the DIY movement if not appropriate for on-site or off-premise item development.



Restaurant Special

As consumers became more adventurous in their at-home cooking efforts, many discovered how challenging many dishes available at restaurants can be to prepare.

Highlighting those dishes that are unique to a restaurant or particularly difficult for at-home preparation can be the centerpiece (assuming appropriate popularity) for “welcome back” promotions. These are the dishes patrons are most likely to have missed and crave when restaurants reopen.

Understanding the complexity of preparing some ingredients and dishes should help to support prices with value being underpinned by this knowledge. Highlight operation skill and uniqueness in communications to enhance this understanding and value perception.

For operators with more items that are easier or more commonly prepared at home, focus on quality of ingredients, consistency, nostalgia, convenience or returning to normal as key messages.

The same can work for beverages. For example, nitro coffee is likely not something consumers experimented with at home and may be one they are missing upon re-entry. Cocktails are another category for which restaurants have a special skill and unique offering.

Status of Some Pre-COVID-19 Trends

Reversing or Halting

Extreme Experimentation

Self-service

Shareable Plates

Lab-grown Foods

Sober Curiosity

Non-edible Inclusions (charcoal, gems, etc.)

Extremely Unique/ Unfamiliar Ingredients

Extreme Flavors (bitter, sour, heat)

Costly Ingredients

Brand Loyalty/ Impact

Gross/ Danger Factor

Unique Breakfast Innovation

Accelerating

Real Foods

Functional Foods

Very Safe Experimentation

Transparency/ Clean Labels

Plant-based/ Plant-forward

Hot/ Spicy Flavors

Cold Brew/ Nitro

Spice Blends

Bowls

Fermented & Pickled Beverages/ Ingredients

Cross-daypart Format Leveraging

Closer-in Mash Ups

About Menu Matters

Maeve Webster, President of Menu Matters, is a leading consultancy working with manufacturers, operators, agencies and commodity boards.

She has spearheaded hundreds of major industry studies during her 20 years as a foodservice specialist, and today runs a private consultancy focused on helping manufacturers and operators understand how trends in consumer behavior and operations can be leveraged for strategic planning. Maeve's expertise is in the areas of trend analysis and evaluation, opportunity assessment, consumer and operator behavior, concept testing, and menu optimization and strategy.

At all times, the primary purpose of Menu Matters is to contextualize findings for clients so the "so what" is apparent, relevant and actionable.



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Food Insights That Matter

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