

Cooking 'Round the Clock

When business slows in off-peak hours, sharp operators find ways to profit.

By Allison Perlik, Senior Editor

The big three dayparts are the bread and butter for most restaurants, but that doesn't mean operators can't find extra slices of profit during off-peak times. The income might be incremental, but the equation of extra revenue plus more options and special experiences for customers equals a positive by most any calculation.

While many operators direct off-peak sales strategies to midmorning, afternoon and late-night hours, almost any time period qualifies. Lunch-focused brands, especially those in business-district markets, might struggle during dinner; independent concepts that bustle on Friday and Saturday nights often see a significant drop-off on Sundays and Mondays.

Regardless of timing, driving traffic on these occasions typically works through three types of initiatives: product-driven, such as special menu items and take-home products; price-driven, including low-priced bar menus and wine discounts; and experience-driven, such as outdoor barbecues and poetry readings. For operators of all kinds, high-impact results make these ideas worth repeating.

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

Wi-Fi, or wireless Internet access, is an increasingly common amenity at quick-service and fast-casual concepts, with big names including Seattle-based Starbucks, Richmond Heights, Mo.-based Panera Bread and Oak Brook, Ill.-based McDonald's leading the way. Smaller brands, among them Ferndale, Mich.-based Zoup! Fresh Soup Co. and Tulsa, Okla.-based Camille's Sidewalk Cafe, are reaping Wi-Fi's rewards as well.

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Afternoon sales have jumped 8% since Camille's introduced Wi-Fi service.

service in May 2003, says Founder and CEO David Rutkauskas; it now is available in three-quarters of the chain's 42 stores.

"It's boring to sit at home and do homework when you can go to Camille's, listen to music and get online for nothing," Rutkauskas says. "I see groups of five or six, and they will all buy a drink and a cookie or snack."

Products that fit "chill-time" dayparts such as afternoons and evenings also are on both chains' menus. Camille's will introduce gelato in October as part of new dessert-only stations, and Zoup! has added smoothies in all new stores and is testing a hot apple product.

Beyond Wi-Fi service and a continuous stream of new > 88



< 87 beverage offerings, Starbucks is giving customers another reason to linger at any time of day. Through a recently announced partnership with a satellite radio provider, the chain will pump its own customized music station into more than 4,000 locations starting next year.

Keeping business cooking between lunch and dinner service is a different proposition for independent restaurants.

The happy-hour menu Managing Partner John Baydale launched at Lincoln restaurant in June appeals to the Santa Monica, Calif., steakhouse's affluent, slightly older daytime demographic that likes to go out in the afternoons to socialize. From 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Mondays through Fridays, customers can order items such as Cobb salads, smoked turkey sandwiches or chili fries (with chili made from filet mignon tips).

"With our prep-intensive menu, we have to staff the kitchen regardless,"

says Baydale, who also has a bartender and server on duty during the period.

At Riingo inside New York City's The Alex Hotel, a bar menu including hand-rolled sushi rounds out Executive Chef Johan Svensson's morning, noon and night service. Only one customer at a table might order food, Svensson says, but the availability prevents an entire group from going elsewhere if one wants to eat.

POST-WEEKEND PICKUPS

It's a popular option, but brunch isn't the only way for restaurants to spur Sunday sales.

Frank Randazzo and Andrea Curto-Randazzo, co-chef-owners of Talula in Miami Beach, Fla., saw both wine sales

North 110 Co-owners Dewey LoSasso (far r.) and his wife, Dale, boost business on slow Mondays by offering fixed-price family-style dinners.



and customer counts jump when they launched a 20%- to 50%-off wine promotion on Sunday nights. Before the offer began, 50% to 60% of tables would order wine on those evenings; now, Frank Randazzo says, he sees bottles on about 80% of tables.

"Even though profits on these bottles are decreased, you still make money at a time you otherwise wouldn't," he says.

The Minnow, a New York City neighborhood spot run by Chef-owner Aaron Bashy and his wife, Vicki, hit on its own big idea during last summer's blackout. Instead of closing the restaurant, Bashy wheeled a grill from his nearby home and prepared meals al fresco. Now he has outdoor barbecues every Sunday night, menuing such items as steak, pork chops, chicken and fresh fish.

Dewey LoSasso is banking on a different kind of communal dining experience to boost business on slow Mondays, when many fine-dining spots are closed. The chef-owner of North 110 restaurant in Miami launched family-style dinners in August at \$34 per person for minimum groups of four. Guests share a variety of appetizers, salads, entrées and desserts that allow them to sample the Florida-influenced, eclectic American menu.

"If I had a sales increase of 30% to 40%, I'd be happy with that," says LoSasso, who runs the 4-month-old spot with wife and partner Dale.

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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

While brands such as Dublin, Ohio-based Wendy's and Irvine, Calif.-based Taco Bell have long made late-night sales a strategy, competitors such as McDonald's and Miami-based Burger King have increased night-owl efforts of late.

"When [late Chairman and CEO] Jim Cantalupo came back from retirement, he said that we should find ways to grow our business by focusing on existing restaurants. Extended hours is one of the ways we are doing just that," says McDonald's spokesman Bill Whitman,

noting that the company is seeing increased guest counts and sales during these times.

About 75% of the chain's 13,500 U.S. locations are open beyond typical hours of 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., and about 12% are open 24 hours, he says. McDonald's markets the extended hours on a local basis through such methods as handing out coupons at nightclubs or awarding free ice cream cones or discounts to guests who arrive in pajamas.

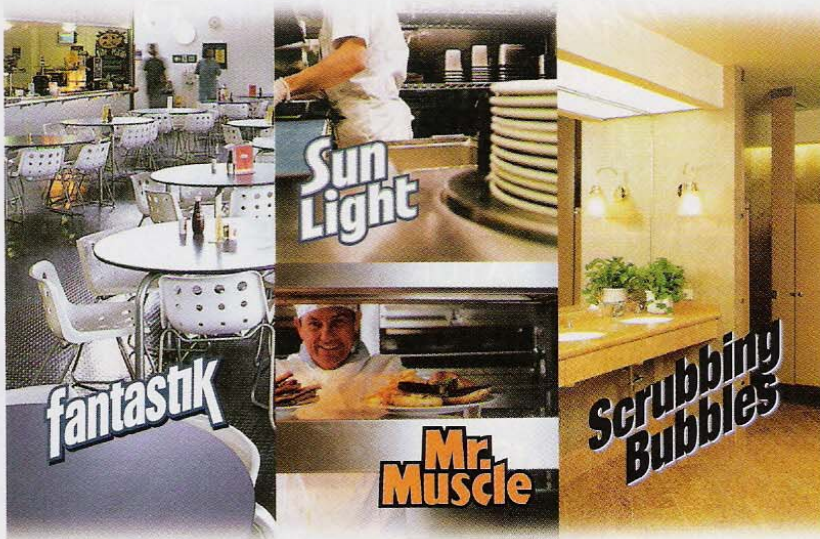
On the noncommercial side, late-night and weekends can act as supplementary dayparts for clients who work beyond regular cafeteria hours. Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexo USA teams with a firm whose software allows customers to place delivery orders online at a wide selection of local restaurants.

"People are working longer, odder hours, so this is a big benefit," says Tracy Kelly, director of business development for national accounts at Sodexo. "It's a service that extends the opportunity for hot-food ordering and dining into the 24/7 realm."



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Time Is Money

- To revitalize business on steamy summer nights, **Brennan's of Houston** introduced Open Kitchen Nights between 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Wednesday nights, offering free cooking demonstrations and wine discussions with hors d'oeuvres and drinks in its roomy kitchen. An average of 120 guests attend, says Owner Alex Brennan-Martin, and about half stay and buy dinner.
- Bob Rohde, a franchisee of Broadview Heights, Ohio-based fast-casual chain **San Francisco Oven**, offers free Thursday night poetry readings to spark evening sales at his Columbus, Ohio, location. Drink sales benefit, and 50% to 75% of guests order food as well.
- Chef Jenny Cates' *taqueria* menu at **Bonfire** in Boston's Park Plaza Hotel features four items—including grilled mushrooms, spicy tuna tartare and scallop tacos—for \$12 between 5 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.