

# Marketing for caterers



Guides



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Many catering businesses are built on passion but how do you persuade potential customers to get as excited as you are about your food? Marketing is key when it comes to engaging with potential customers, building a following and driving sales.

A common misconception is Marketing is just advertising – but what is the point of advertising if you don't know who you are selling to, where they are and what price they can afford to pay. In reality Marketing is the 'who, what, where, when, why and how' for your business.

If you look marketing up in a text book they wrap it up in the '4Ps' - Product, Price, Place and Promotion but in reality it is all about common sense.

### What am I going to sell

This is your food, your menu, your passion, what your business sells. However, there is no point in preparing your food if no one is going to buy it. Do you know who your audience are and what they are likely to want? I don't recall seeing too many expensive sushi catering vans outside building sites or in lay-bys – but they do really well in street food markets.

Have a vision of who your ideal customer is and build your menu around that person.

You then need to make sure that you get repeat business from your target audience and that can be achieved with daily, weekly and seasonal specials.

Then think about making your ideal customer drive past other caterers to purchase from you, how can you make your food different? Can you include healthy options, gluten free, vegan or halal?

## How much can I charge

There are two ways of looking at pricing – bottom up – how much does everything cost and multiply by X for profit, or top down – how much will people pay and can you get your costs to make it viable.

Your pricing needs to match your target audience and if the next caterer along is selling for half of what you charge you are likely to miss out on custom.

Customers look for pricing to be fair but they will also pay a premium for quality food and excellent customer service. And, always make sure you have your 'food hygiene score' on display to back up claims.

## Where should I set up

This is your 'pitch' or 'site' and where you get your interaction with the public and potential customers. You need to be where your target audience frequent for instance targeting trades people at DIY stores and builders merchants or shoppers at retail parks and supermarket car parks.

Many sites now require a traders licence which will be available from the local council. The site is also likely to be managed by a commercialisation company so make sure these costs are factored into your outgoings.

A number of caterers have reacted to accessibility issues throughout 2020 and created a delivery service from their unit to support their customers who couldn't or wouldn't leave their premises. This also supports providing a service to local factories and offices with a drop off service for a 'shipping order' placed.

Understanding the geodemographics of an area will help you to choose the right site and is a service a commercialisation company can help you with.

## Promotion

This is how people are going to find out about your catering business and what you offer, what many people consider to be marketing. There are many promotional tools to consider and your budget is likely to influence the channels that will be most suitable for your business, for example –

- Do you need a website to educate your target audience on your menu and the ingredients you use? This is great if you are targeting local factories and offices – they could even place orders via the site.
- Social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter – make sure you advertise the links on your van and any printed materials. A great way of advertising 'specials' or showing pictures of customers enjoying your food.
- Printed menus (including contact details) are great for customers to take away – encourage them to pin them on the noticeboard back at work and pass around to their colleagues. Include a small map so new customers will be able to find you.
- Your unit is a great marketing tool with the menu and images printed on it, chalkboards with specials, etc – make it enticing to draw in customers, ensure it is clean and tidy and have all contact details for phone and social media on display.

- Best kept secrets don't stay in business long – encourage word of mouth recommendations from your customers and reward them for bringing in business.
- Loyalty cards for repeat business – this can be done very cheaply using business card sized giveaways and using a rubber stamp, and suits buy 4 get the 5th free type promotions. Another form of loyalty could be to offer discounts for large orders placed by a certain time. This allows you to get it prepared before the busy period and may be attractive to your local business community.

When starting out always choose a strong brand and think what it will mean to customers – does it portray quality? safety? hygiene? friendliness? Choose an image that matches your brand and use it on everything you produce – to reinforce the message.

Social media is becoming more prevalent for businesses of all sizes and is a fantastic way of interacting with your customers and creating a two-way dialogue. You can inform your followers of specials, changes to opening times and if you are attending any events or social gatherings. Your followers can share your posts with their friends and followers, extending your audience as well as being able to send you feedback and messages.

There are many groups that are more than happy to help caterers to find a site from the local council to groups who create and support markets, street food markets, social events and public gatherings as well as managing shopping centres, retail parks and industrial estates. By following these groups you will understand what opportunities are available.

When looking for help and advice, social media can really come to the fore, with many catering groups set up to support the mobile catering community. Other caterers are more than happy to help with advice from best deals at the wholesalers/local suppliers, best pricing on gas, cleaning regimes, equipment, where to get items repaired and who to speak to at the local authority. Never be afraid of reaching out and joining these groups – many of the other members will have experience of what you are going through.

**And ... always remember – what am I going to sell? Who to? Where? How much do I charge? And how do I let them know what I am doing?**