

BOWL_(ing) For DOLLAR\$

This article is not about a round ball with three holes in it, ten pins or an alley-NO, this article is about how to increase sales and profits in your food service establishment during a down economy and concurrently better satisfy your “thrifty” conscious customers. Realizing that the economy is in a “hole” and there seems to be no immediate or short term improvement in sight; that your cost of goods are increasing; you have less traffic (customers) partially because of layoffs and partially because those who remain are spending less; I am sure you and your staff are looking for ways to reduce costs and/or increase sales. I always think it is best to seek ways to increase sales before you start chopping costs. Those operators who reduce costs first very often find themselves continuing to chop, chop, chop until they chop themselves out of business. Of course, during this economic challenge, you have to be more frugal, but this does not mean you reduce staff and menu items to a level that no matter what, you cannot survive.

So here is my suggestion to increase sales and profitability while at the same time increasing customer traffic and satisfaction. This is not a new idea. Why do we need to reinvent the wheel when it is rolling along just fine? To put this in perspective, I had a boss who told me to never be the first at anything. His point was to wait until someone else has done all the research, made all the costly mistakes, tweaked the concept, paid for the marketing and then rolled out the product to be a success. At this point, his advice was to then jump on board and be the second person to launch the product and enhance it if possible, but not spend all the R&D time and money to be the first across the finish line. Finish second, or even third, so that by then your customer knows about the menu item and is ready to try it at your facility.

Bowl_(ing) for Dollars means that you take a large salad or cereal bowl and you fill the bottom with a very inexpensive food product (such as rice, noodles, mashed potatoes, biscuits or even corn). These base items can be further expanded, for example when using noodles, you can use spaghetti, angel hair, penne and bow tie. For rice, you can use white, brown, wild or a mixture. For potatoes, you can use mashed Idaho or Sweet or even French fries. Once you decide what base(s) you will offer, then you can decide what topping(s) will go over these base items. This is when it gets real fun- there are a myriad of food products to choose from, such as sloppy joe mix, fried chicken strips, steamed veggies, creamed items (chicken or pork), For some items, you can pour some gravy over the top and then finish it off by sprinkling some shredded cheese on the very top.

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Along the same line, you can take a vending size bag of Fritos, smash up the Fritos, then cut the top off the bag, fill the bag with chili-put the bag and all in a bowl and give your customer a spoon to enjoy this unique, but popular food item. For X cents more, you can add all types of toppings: shredded cheese, sliced black olives, chopped onion and a dollop of sour cream. This puts a new twist on the traditional bowl of chili that everyone offers and will excite your customers because it is something unique and new-I am sure they will even tell their co-workers to try it!

Realize that all of your preparation is done in advance so that one person can make up the ingredients in the morning and be the same person to serve the menu item at lunch. You can feature one “Bowl Special” each day of the week or have several signature bowl items (those that are always popular) and supplement these with daily bowl specials. Please note that I am not a chef, but I do understand all the dynamics of the food service business-over the many years of being in this business, I know what works and what will not work, so I my aim here is to provide you with an menu idea and challenge you to work with your staff to develop the **Bowl** concept further and make it work at your facility. Getting your staff involved will definitely get them to “buy into” the concept and make it more fun for everyone. Hey there is no limit to what toppings can be put over your base product. And really, if you cannot come up with an idea, then just go to your local fried chicken chain (you know the one the Colonel started) and copy what they do for a starter.

Keep in mind that if you do your homework and work with your vendors, the costs for the bowl menu items can be well below what your average menu cost would be which will allow you to sell the bowl feature for less (making your customers happy and coming back for more).

If you are reading this article, I know you are a smart operator who wants to ‘fast track’ this menu concept, so take the Chef Emeril approach and put the BAM to work. Once you have established your plan of action (which you need to make any new menu/concept a success) and you are ready to launch the **BOWL(ing) For Dollars**, then you need to do some promoting. Start with signage (coming soon will work as a tickler), broadcast thru the intranet and then run a contest for all of your customers to submit their ingredients for a **BOWL** special. Pick a winner a week and let everyone know who the winner is, what the special will be and what day you will be serving the special. On that day, you may want to a) give the winning customer the meal for free, b) invite the winner to actually serve their special for that day (have them put on an apron and hat and actually do the serving). Believe me, the winner who is doing the serving will have all of his/her fellow workers buying “their” special **BOWL** on that day.

So don’t wait, get **Bowl(ing) For Dollars** today and have some fun with it-for both your staff and customers and along the way, enjoy an increase in sales and profitability.

This article was written by Jerry McVety, President of McVety & Associates, LLC and has appeared in many food service trade magazines. You can contact Jerry at 248-737-0800.