

10 Strategies for Your Restaurant's Next LTO

Almost half of all restaurant consumers find it important for operators to keep menus fresh throughout the year by offering specialty items and LTOs (limited-time offer). This post provides 10 unique strategies to help strengthen your LTO menu and optimize profits.

Editor's Notes: Favorite desserts in fresh new forms. In today's environment especially, it can be challenging for restaurants to take menu risks, but safe options can come from reinventing just one SKU.

According to the Technomic study of 2019, 45% of consumers say it's "important" or "extremely important" to them that restaurants offer new or seasonal menu items throughout the year. Of those consumers, 26% said that they'd be willing to pay MORE for special items. This gives restaurants the opportunity to create limited-time menu offerings, with high profit margins. Furthermore, after consumers experience an enjoyable LTO, 82% will return to order it again, 75% will tell other people about it, and 65% will return to order something else.

Additionally, there are a number of studies that link LTOs to **impulse purchases**. By letting customers know that there's a limited availability of that day's special, restaurants can encourage guests to jump on a special they might otherwise have skipped over, just because there's a slim window of opportunity to do so.

"Specials can even help your restaurant save money that otherwise would have been wasted. Food waste accounts for a fair amount of expenses in restaurant kitchens, and offering a special that utilizes an ingredient you need to use up is a great way to cut down on waste."

With careful planning and the right execution, limited-time offers can be a profitable part of your operation. Research suggests that 45% of operators estimate that a strong promotion generates at least a 10% lift in monthly sales compared to a month without an LTO. A powerful LTO doesn't just add variety to the menu, it offers an experience. However, up to 70% of operators find initiating trendy menu items to be challenging. That's why we've compiled a list of strategies to implement when designing LTOs and suggested recipes to consistently stimulate your menu.

Strategies

Here are ten strategies to make your LTOs work harder to satisfy your guests and improve your bottom line.



Cookie Shake Recipe

1. Brand & Menu alignment

Customers are coming to you to satisfy a craving based on your theme of offerings and brand. It may be tempting to jump on trendy bandwagons, but going too astray with your LTO can be confusing. When developing LTOs make sure it's something customers would reasonably expect from your operation. It will help define and enhance your brand, not dilute it.

Know your audience! Apply your restaurant data like most-ordered dishes; what demographics order them the most; and busiest time of day; to help with the creation of your LTO.

2. The Buzz Timeline

It takes time for the word to get out about special offerings, so most operators run their LTOs for between one and three months. Commit to an LTO for at least one month, to give your advertisements (both paid and word of mouth) enough time to build momentum. The buzz will spread.

As the LTO program winds down, it's important for operators to remove point of purchase materials and communicate with service personnel on scripting responses and offering alternative items. An end to a brilliant LTO can be disappointing to customers, but it's the perfect time to excite them about new specials just around the corner.

3. New, yet familiar



Amarena Cherry & Amaretto Cheesecake

Start by putting a twist on your existing menu items. Consumers are looking for one of two things when it comes to LTOs: new products to try or a different take on their old faves. Research shows the most successful LTOs take a dish the customer is familiar with and make it special simply by adding an indulgent ingredient or two. Utilize your menu data to determine which items are the most popular. Then, put a twist on already high-demand foods to energize your bread-and-butter customers.

This approach has multiple benefits. First, by starting with something familiar to your patrons, you can be sure they'll understand what your LTO is, which eliminates uncertainty. Second, adding something new to an existing menu item can make it easier for your kitchen staff to learn and execute flawlessly.



Sweet Street Instagram

4. Bank on Trendy

Embrace the fads. Staying on trend is challenging, by the time you figure out what's "in", it's probably already on it's way out. Social media is a great tool to find inspiration for your next LTO. Make the connection of what's hot with your customers and it'll be well worth the effort. Food holidays can be a strategic way to attract new customers, as an example of trendy specials. Use this national food holiday calendar to find marketing opportunities for your restaurant.

5. The Customer's Always Right

When in doubt, involve your customers in the creation of your next LTO. The development of an LTO is a valuable opportunity to engage guests and get a deeper understanding of the flavors and dishes they're craving. Willing customers, about 70%, say they want to contribute to the creation of LTOs. By involving your customers in this process and getting feedback right from the source, you reduce the risk of a flop. Increase the prospect of a hot item or the best thing since PSLs (Pumpkin Spiced Lattes).

6. Creativity & Novelty



Mandarin & Gingered Pear Xango

Thinking outside the box with off-the-wall flavor combinations can get your customers talking. No need to play it safe, try something gutsy, something new, something you've thought about before, but never dared to try. It's a limited-time offer, so if it fails, you can always try something else next time. A successful LTO will have customers driving miles and miles just to get their hands on it. Although many LTOs don't see a sequel, the potential buzz alone makes them worth the try.

If you're struggling to come up with new ideas, look to the ones who know your menu best, your team members. Chances are, they've had ideas of their own about what LTOs might work.

7. Hit That Replay Button

When you find a hit LTO that patrons love, bring it back on a regular basis. Research suggests that returning LTOs are among the most successful, satisfying customers who already love the item and look forward to ordering it again.

Seasonal LTOs fit this approach perfectly, ranking #1 in terms of consumer interest (78%), followed by value-priced LTOs (76%). The unique flavors available each season invite experimentation, with plenty of demand: 47% of diners (aged 18 - 34) say their menu preferences change with the seasons. Restaurants can capitalize on the popularity of seasonal flavors and items that make sense for their menus.

8. Choose Your Words Carefully

Take extra care in how you name and describe your LTO. Make saying "yes" easy to say for your guests, by carefully choosing the words to name and describe your offering on the menu. Use words that convey how special and unique your LTO is, but stick to terms that customers will understand to prevent a costly error. Crunchy, chewy, smooth, rich, creamy are great textures to get mouths watering.



Dessert Bowl Recipes

9. Eat With Your Eyes

We eat with our eyes first, and this still rings true, especially in the age of social media where engaging visuals act as the modern dollar. Therefore, an appetizing photo of your LTO item is a must. Invest the time and money to get mouth-watering images of your new items and share it through social media, email campaigns, and in-store POS materials like posters or table cards.

If you're the DIY-type, there are an endless amount of online tutorials that can guide you on how to take delicious photos of food with little more than a phone and natural light.

Here's a few of our favorites:

- Phone Basics
- Amazing Food Photos
- Everything Else

10. Detail-Oriented

From day one, you'll want your staff to be educated and prepared to explain your LTOs consistently to guests. Well before the launch, practice executing the item so you can gauge how long it takes to prepare and you can troubleshoot any operational challenges before you invest in the ingredients and launch the product. Allow your service staff to taste the LTO so they can share their personal experience and enthusiasm with customers, and make sure they understand the terminology used to describe it.

Limited-time offers can be unpredictable, so your best idea might not land with your customer base, while your last-second idea might be the one that hits it big. Don't be discouraged. LTOs are your chance to take risks and **BE BOLD**. Use these tips to build a basic LTO strategy, then try a few things and see what works.

Resources: General Mills | QSRAutomations | Simplotfoods | Delaget