The Catering Institute™

Ten Ways To Build Your Restaurant Catering Program

A Catering Institute Original Essay by Erle Dardick, *Founder and CEO, The Catering Institute™*

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When I first started at Tony's Deli 16 years ago, the restaurant had a good loyal following among its hometown community in Vancouver, British Columbia. The deli was thriving and, as our business grew, many customers asked us if we could bring the "Tony's Experience" to their office. This was the start of our business-to-business catering service at Tony's Deli and with that we changed the name of our restaurant to "Tony's Deli & Catering Company."

> *"Eighty percent of your customer base lives or works within a 10-minute drive of your location and this means your store's physical environment is a key marketing tool for your catering business"*

Like any start-up venture, our strengths and weaknesses became more clearly defined as we embarked on this new sales channel. At first, we took orders on a napkin! Yet, the wind would blow and we would lose the order; not a great start to our catering program. However, as our orders increased we were able to put great processes in place that enabled our new business venture to thrive.

It was during the ongoing development of our catering program that I began to understand the cross-pollination marketing opportunities between channels to help reach customers who had never heard of Tony's Deli. These customers were new to us and if we did a great job on catering, we were acquiring new fans for the brand. We also were building our brand awareness among consumers. As the days passed, we continued to look for ways to improve our operations. We worked hard.

Growing catering revenues requires professional business-to-business selling skills. Of course, the consumption experience has to be great, but if your customers don't know you're in the business of catering, they will only think of your services as they are now, which might be limited to inside your four walls, your take-out program and/or your drive-thru operation.

Getting the word out about your catering program can be a difficult task. Your in-store employees may have little, if any, experience selling your catering services. But if done correctly, your brand's specific catering message will be used in every area of your business — making it easier for your employees to effectively communicate the differences between your service channels.

Eighty percent of your customer base lives or works within a 10-minute drive of your location and this means your store's physical environment is a key marketing tool for your catering business. Here are 10 catering tactics that worked at Tony's Deli & Catering Company. As I travel from company to company, these ideas continue to work for multiunit restaurant companies that have successfully layered catering on top of their existing business.

1. Earn customer confidence with predictable and reliable services every time, across all service channels for your brand. Customers will only order services from your company if they are certain that ordering from any location will be consistent across locations.

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2. Placing orders must be easy for customers and must be predictable to keep your customers' trust. Your team members must be knowledgeable, friendly and professional at all customer touch points.

3. Centralized services are a necessity to the serious catering program. Consider managing or outsourcing a call center that receives all catering inquiries and orders. Having a centralized order entry point will ensure that your clients receive a consistent, controlled and positive experience from team members who know the subtleties of your catering offerings and services. Create "catering specialists" where possible. Order entry is the front line when it comes to catering orders.

4. Follow up after each catering order with a call from your catering leader. Your customers will feel that you care about them. Any unresolved issues may be addressed and future business discussed. Follow up with every single order, every time.

5. Conduct surveys. Incentivize your customers to take the survey while the experience is fresh in their mind. By asking specific questions you will get feedback on any part of the order process that might not be working as well as you would like.

6. Keep in contact. No one likes to feel like a number and staying in touch with your customers on a regular basis keeps your service in the front of their mind. Hire a catering sales team to maintain relationships and pursue new ones. Active selling is key to growing a catering program.

7. Don't forget to look after sleepy clients. These customers order less than once per month. It can be easy to forget to touch base with them, but they will actually make up a good chunk of your revenue — especially around the holidays. You can contact them with special offers to entice them to order more frequently.

8. Reward loyalty with a rewards program. B2B catering is big business and companies spend a lot of money on feeding their guests. Providing a designed catering rewards program lets them know that you recognize how valuable they are. This program can sometimes be a determining factor when it comes to maintaining an ongoing relationship with your customers.

9. Send hand-written thank you notes. Nothing speaks to a customer more about how much you care then when they receive a thank you card in the mail. Make sure you keep it personal and specific so it does not look "mass produced." Personal touches are key to making your catering customers feel special.

10. Turn a negative into a positive. If a customer does have a negative experience, make sure you thank them for letting you know, acknowledge that you have heard them, accept responsibility and then make it right. Make sure you write it up and keep it with your client records.

If done correctly, these simple tactics can help you score big points with new and existing customers. At Tony's, we used these tactics every single day. By 2001, catering represented 50 percent of our revenue! These results changed the unit economics of our restaurant and I am certain that if you do the simple things each and every day, it will change your restaurant economics as well.

Let's talk catering.

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About The Catering Institute

The Catering Institute is a leading educator in takeout, delivery and catering, providing training, certification and consulting to restaurant operators and their teams.

The Catering Institute is a private, independent academic institution. Led by founder and CEO Erle Dardick, the faculty at the Catering Institute is passionate about helping brands excel at feeding their customers where they Live, Work & Play™.

Learn more:
www.cateringinstitute.com

About Erle Dardick

Erle Dardick is a 17-year catering veteran, business turn-around expert and author, best known for helping multi-unit restaurant executives create successful catering revenue channels. Erle founded both MonkeyMedia Software and The Catering Institute. He is also the Author of "Get Catering and Grow Sales! A Strategic Perspective for The Multi-Unit Restaurant Executive."

Get Catering and Grow Sales!™

A Strategic Perspective for the Multi-Unit Restaurant Executive

By **Erle Dardick**

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As Partners in Education, MonkeyMedia Software, PepsiCo Foodservice, and Catering Insights work with the Catering Institute, to help restaurant operators grow sales and increase profits by educating them to become experts at feeding their customers where They Live, Work and Play™.

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