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## Restaurants shifting to omni-channel platforms; preparing for pent-up consumer demand

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For more than a year, we have watched as restaurants from our neighborhood diner to multi-market chains have pivoted to survive with the new pandemic standards of operation. Covid-19 shuttered most food purveyors' ability to utilize their real estate for indoor service, and consumers have come to understand that "dining out" rarely means dining in under current occupancy restrictions.

Though restaurants historically have been almost exclusively an offline business, current operators have discovered that to remain sustainable they needed to adapt to an omni-channel platform of service. Read below for tips on implementing an omni-channel marketing strategy to expand your brand and increase customer satisfaction.

**Embrace smart technology**



Though restaurants historically have been almost exclusively an offline business, current operators have discovered that to remain sustainable they needed to adapt to an omni-channel platform of service.

Technology has been an undeniable factor in restaurant recovery and provides a growth engine for every spectrum of the food service industry. The quick service sector was ahead of the trend with existing take-out models in place, but more traditional restaurants have started to embrace elements of their concept to survive and thrive. With contactless delivery becoming a preeminent priority, restaurants are tapping into smart technology that enables them to establish a digital foundation for transactions and data capture.

By creating frictionless options for diners, restaurants are developing new forms of customer engagement and acquiring a tidal wave of invaluable information to remain relevant and sustain business well into the future.

### **Focus on food delivery management**

Food delivery management has become challenging in the post-pandemic climate. Demand for door-to-door delivery was growing substantially prior to the start of the Covid-19 lockdowns and has risen sharply since. Third-party delivery services have expanded exponentially in response to demand, attracting a wide pool of employees, from first-job teenagers to the unemployed and under-employed looking to supplement income. With traditionally higher hourly wages and sometimes even a few benefits, the national delivery services have caused a shortage in direct delivery employees for many local and regional operators. Additionally, the margins narrow significantly for smaller operators paying high transactional fees to subscribe to these third-party platforms.

With so many platforms to consider, consumers can become overwhelmed and lose interest.

Streamlining the ordering process so that all third-party platforms converge into one point-of-sale (POS) system is one way to reduce frustration and improve efficiency for both the operator and the consumer. Alternately, multi-market and franchise operators have found success through exclusive partnerships with third-party delivery services. For example, Door Dash Drive offers white label delivery solutions to restaurants with existing mobile ordering applications. The operator maintains control of the ordering and payment processes but coordinates delivery through the Door

Dash driver program. Collaborations such as these can enable restaurants to scale up off-premises service without long-term impact to payroll.

### **Ghost kitchens and virtual brands**

From seasoned celebrity chefs to new independent operators, restaurateurs from all facets of the industry are exploring new and revenue-producing ways to innovate and reach current and potential customers. Ghost kitchens and virtual brands create a pathway for operators to expand to new markets at a minimal expense and risk while simultaneously creating additional revenue streams for existing operators working to sustain business with restricted indoor dining capacity.

### **Pent-up demand for on-premises dining**

One needs only to attempt to book a reservation on a Saturday to experience firsthand the pent-up demand for in-person dining. In fact, a survey by the National Restaurant Association found that demand had surpassed 67% in December 2020. Despite a year of partial and complete closures, 88% of consumers surveyed said they enjoy going to restaurants and 85% said restaurants provide a better use of leisure time and place for social gathering than cooking at home.

Though the industry's focus over the past year has been on perfecting contactless delivery and seamless carryout, operators also need to take into consideration their real estate and operational footprints. Consumers clearly have indicated their strong desire to return to in-person dining when it is safe to do so. Operators can take advantage of the dining room closures to reassess layout and logistics in preparation for reopening at full capacity.

The pandemic has presented the perfect storm of challenges that temporarily crippled our industry's ability to perform, but we are bullish on the recovery of the restaurant and bar industry. By differentiating the dining experience and adopting an omni-channel approach, many operators have strengthened their operations; improved their profitability; and secured their businesses for the long term.

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