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## 10 Ways to Leverage the Experience Economy

How quick serves are delivering more dynamic and memorable dining experiences.

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SONIC DRIVE-IN

**Sonic has set itself apart through a drive-in concept that creates a unique customer experience.**

The first Buona restaurant opened on the edge of Chicago in 1981 as a no frills, laminate- and tile-filled space peddling the Windy City's glorious favorites, including dragged-through-the-garden hot dogs and Italian beef sandwiches.

"It was your typical fast-food independent mentality," says Joe Buonavolanto, chief executive of Buona.

Some 36 years later, however, Buonavolanto knows it's a different game for his family's now-18-unit enterprise. That reality is reflected in the polished, refined atmosphere of Buona's latest restaurants, which feature big-screen televisions, uber-attentive staff, and modern design elements.

"People aren't just looking for a commodity anymore," Buonavolanto says. "They want an experience."

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around the food, not just the food.”

With competition surging and consumer appetite for experience growing, restaurants know they need to be unique, different, and interesting. That means pushing beyond food and beverage and into areas such as environment, technology, service, and special events to provide a more thoughtful and complete experience, says Amanda Topper, associate director of foodservice research at Mintel.

She says consumers, particularly younger consumers, are increasingly interested in experiences instead of things. Even more, they crave novel experiences and are eager to combat FOMO, or fear of missing out.

In an attempt to curry favor with these consumers, limited-service operators across the country are embracing today's “experience economy” in diverse and spirited ways.

#### Giving a show

Mississippi-based Newk's Eatery developed its latest prototype unit to have an open kitchen so guests could see, savor, and smell every prepared menu item.

“There is no better way to tap into the experience economy than to invite the consumer behind the scenes,” says Stewart Slocum, Newk's chief marketing officer.

Others similarly embrace the show-don't-tell philosophy. For example, guests can watch employees at Naf Naf Grill make pita bread from scratch, while those visiting 10Below, a Thai-style ice cream concept with locations in New York and Los Angeles, can look upon employees rolling up thin layers of ice cream.

Visitors to any of Utah-based **Sub Zero** Ice Cream's 47 units are sure to receive a show. In creating each custom-made order, crewmembers freeze ice cream directly in front of the guest using liquid nitrogen, a science-infused spectacle that produces clouds of smoke.

“We've always come back to the fact that it's an experience that customers are looking for; it's the experience that makes it memorable,” **Sub Zero** cofounder Naomi Hancock says.

#### Serving post-worthy items

Instagram, Twitter, and their social media brethren have unquestionably accelerated the experience economy, compelling restaurants to make visits more eventful, fun, and authentic to ignite online sharing. For some, creative menu specialties are just the answer.

Florida-based Sloan's Ice Cream offers a “kitchen sink sundae,” a plastic kitchen sink filled with 18 scoops of ice cream, four chocolate chip cookies, four brownies, and toppings. In Brooklyn, New York, The Bagel Store features the Rainbow Bagel, a hand-rolled artisan bagel featuring myriad bright colors. The Rainbow Bagel generated so much social media attention in 2016 that one of The Bagel Store's locations temporarily closed from the rush.

Others up the experience factor with catchy limited-time offers. Starbucks, for instance, captured headlines last holiday season with its Fruitcake Frappuccino, while **Sub Zero's** monthly Flavor Sensations regularly touch on childhood memories, with flavors such as PB&J and S'mores.

Such LTOs, **Sub Zero's** Hancock says, provide customers a unique—and limited—opportunity to experiment with a compelling flavor, which can create a stir, spark visits, and deliver a memorable experience.

#### Concocting a one-of-a-kind atmosphere

Sloan's Ice Cream has made its mark by rejecting normalcy and being an out-of-the-box eatery that seizes the senses—and the imagination. Sloan's walls are neon pink and green, while dancing babies adorn the ceilings. It's an over-the-top environment complemented by the scents of freshly baked goods.

“We didn't want to be just another ice cream shop. We wanted to stand out and give kids and adults an unforgettable experience,” says Sloan's founder Sloan Kamenstein, a classically trained chef who opened the first Sloan's in 1999.

#### Tapping into nostalgia

In a recent Y-Pulse study of the prized 18- 34-year-old demographic, 69 percent of respondents

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course, but also a reminder of how energized elements of the past resonate with today's consumers.

In an effort to promote the relaunch of "Gilmore Girls," Netflix transformed more than 200 coffeeshops across the country into Luke's Diner, a restaurant from the show. In Chicago, the pop-up "Saved by the Max" was a replica of "The Max," the diner from the popular "Saved by the Bell" television series.

"This is tapping into a sense of nostalgia, as well as something unique and limited in nature," Mintel's Topper says.

But nostalgia often works best when supported by contemporary elements. Sonic, for instance, celebrates years gone by with its skating carhops and sentimental drive-in format. The 3,600-unit chain, however, continues modernizing its retro feel in savvy ways, evident by its POPS (Point of Personalized Service) technology. Slated to be installed in all Sonic units by the end of this year, POPS features a touchscreen at every drive-in stall, which puts the personalized service today's consumers crave right alongside the nostalgia.

"[Guests'] time in a Sonic drive-in stall is completely their own," says Sonic's vice president of national marketing, Lori Abou Habib, adding that the technology provides Sonic the ability to ensure that the guest experience "is positive, memorable, and worthy of another visit."

### **Leveraging technology**

Technology is engrained in modern lives and plays a pivotal role in the experience economy, particularly when it comes to ensuring a seamless and modern process that delivers on lofty consumer expectations.

Starbucks, for example, is expected to launch a virtual barista on its mobile app later this year. Customers will be able to order by talking to the app's AI bot, which will then send the order to the nearby store for the customer to pick up sans waiting.

Many Johnny Rockets' units, meanwhile, have begun incorporating self-ordering kiosks. In some locations, the kiosks are placed outside of the restaurant and allow guests to expedite the ordering process. In other locations, the kiosks serve as an additional service line.

"This provides an accurate and highly engaged experience where takeout guests ... can use the kiosk to place their orders and avoid waiting in line for a table," says Joel Bulger, Johnny Rockets chief marketing officer.

Mindful of the experience economy, Domino's has doubled down on technology in recent years, particularly ordering technology. The pizza giant's AnyWare ordering, a suite of technology that allows customers to order anywhere, anytime, and from any device, includes ordering via Google Home, Messenger, Amazon Echo, text, tweet, emoji, and more. Domino's also promotes its Pizza Tracker solution, which allows customers to track the status of their order from the start of preparation to its placement into the oven and, later, when it is out for delivery or ready for pickup. The chain even launched a Domino's wedding registry.

The collective, tech-fueled efforts, says Domino's director of digital experience Chris Roeser, continue resonating with customers because they create a convenient, enjoyable, and unique experience.

"Some try out ordering with a pizza emoji when they're with a group of friends because it's a fun, different experience," he says. "We also hear from customers who tell us how much they love watching the Pizza Tracker with their kids. They know where their order is each step of the way and have fun anticipating its arrival."

### **Delivering a personal touch**

For as much as society embraces technology to boost the experience factor, the human element cannot be overlooked when seeking to provide guests a memorable and distinctive visit.

The Wiener's Circle in Chicago has earned widespread attention for the late-night banter between its guests and employees. What the often-crass back-and-forths might lack in civility, they make up for in unforgettable stories repeated time and again.

Earlier this year, The New York Times introduced "Fritz the Schmooser" to the broader world. The well-intentioned, multilingual employee at Breads Bakery in New York City walks the floor to share

In an increasingly digital world, these moments of human interaction stand out and can elevate the guest experience.

### **Giving guests control**

Whether through self-ordering kiosks or customized dishes, more quick serves are providing guests control over their dining experience, confident that consumers relish the ability to customize.

Blast & Brew, a Fresno, California-based fast-casual pizza concept, offers a wall of some 40 self-pour craft-beer taps. This encourages exploration and provides guests immediate control of their options.

"It's all about the customer and what they want their experience at Blast & Brew to be like," says Michael Reynolds, the concept's chief development officer. "This lends itself to a very unique opportunity to build that memorable experience."

Johnny Rockets recently took the idea of guest control beyond food and beverage. Through the chain's RockBot music program, guests can play DJ by going online and determining the dining room's next tunes.

"By being able to participate in the selection process, guests are not just interacting with each other, but also directly with the restaurant," Bulger says. "This increased level of engagement tells guests that we value their opinion and what they listen to while they're with us."

### **Educating the masses**

As consumer interest in a brand's history and values accelerates, restaurants are sharing this information in accessible ways, from television spots and social media to in-store signage and staff. Expertise, after all, is special currency to today's younger consumers, in particular.

At Buona, an oversized wall graphic titled "Beefography" details the step-by-step process of making an Italian beef. Buona also runs regular beer-pairing dinners at its Chicago-area locations alongside Two Brothers Artisan Brewing. The popular special events provide guests an intimate culinary experience complete with insights from beer and culinary experts.

**Sub Zero** spotlights its liquid nitrogen ice cream process at school and community events to demonstrate science concepts, while "Beer Geniuses" at Blast & Brew help educate guests on things such as how to properly pour beer and the difference between ales, stouts, pilsners, and other styles.

### **Cultivating local ties**

Local flair gives many customers a positive impression of a restaurant brand.

At Tijuana Flats, a 125-unit, Orlando-based chain, community members make each location's ceiling tiles for undeniable local flavor.

At each of its 400-plus units, Chicago-based Potbelly Sandwich Shop works to enhance the experience by reflecting its local communities. This includes bringing in live music from local performers, hosting community fundraising events for schools and organizations, and dressing each restaurant in décor and mementos culled from the neighborhood.

"It's these small details that make our customers smile and prompt a fun conversation or memory," says Potbelly senior vice president Matt Revord.

### **Riding the sports, arts, and culture wave**

For many restaurant chains, there's value in tapping into entertainment, both inside and outside the eatery.

Earlier this year, Starbucks unveiled "1st and Main," a short animated web series from a trio of "The Simpsons" writers. The shows appear on the coffee shop's WiFi landing pages and further define the quintessential Starbucks experience.

Outside of the restaurant, Mintel's Topper says, there can be a halo effect when brands latch onto—or even create—entertainment events that deliver an enlivened experience.

Since 2009, for example, fast-casual chain Sweetgreen has hosted the Sweetlife Festival. The event pairs top musical talent with a diverse lineup of local food vendors.

Buona meanwhile serves its beef sandwiches at Chicago's two professional baseball stadiums—

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Cubs score in the bottom of the sixth, fans receive a free beef. At White Sox games, three costumed Italian beefs—Cheesy, Juicy, and Hot & Sweet—race along the baselines.

“This is all about getting folks to remember us on a positive note,” Buonavolanto says.

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