



Anthony

Follow the Leader? Why?



Story by Scott Anthony
Photos by Josh Keown

Sixteen years of owning a pizzeria is quite an education. I've been self-employed since college, yet marketing a pizzeria requires a set of tools that are not transferrable business skills. Pizza marketing is like no other — the coupon-driven business can be a rude awakening to any operator.

Time and again I see talented persons with great recipes who can't turn their passion into profits. They are oversold on the false concept that pizza sells itself. These men and women come into the pizza business with a lack of perception of who they are, and therefore a lack of means to communicate or market that concept to others. Let's face it: you can't be all things to everyone. Getting into the pizza business requires that we define ourselves with a solid business plan that includes a conceivable marketing plan. I am bewildered when I see a menu or Web site that has multiple USP's, or features built-in discounted pricing. Are we selling a culinary experience or a commodity?

Will you be the authentic Italian pizza, the price-is-right guy, the fresh ingredient pizzeria or the destination dining experience? Answering these types of questions determines who you are and how you market your product — and even if a market exists for you.

For example, a tendency among operators is to play follow the leader with couponing.

An operator with a quality product, and thus a slightly higher food cost, will quickly find himself in a vicious cycle because there is no way out other than to keep reducing the quality of your product so that you can afford to sell it at the couponed rate. In effect, this operator devalues their own product and allows consumers to assume, by the operator's marketing tactics, they never have to pay menu price because it is really not worth it.

It boils down to communication.

Can you communicate your dream of being a successful pizza operator into a profitable business plan? Can you communicate to your market why your product is priced as such? What ways will you use to communicate to your market? My advertising costs in my previous business consisted of buying business cards every other year. Nearly every contract I took on was thru referrals. I was just a conscientious guy doing a good job. Suddenly I find myself in a pizzeria and that is not good enough. I am a stressed out Dad with my kid pizzeria asking me why, why, why — that is when he does talk to me.

Following the leader did not work for me. It made me work harder for less. I had to analyze my pizza and see where I fit into the big scheme of things and then ask myself 'where did I want to be?' Once I found that answer I now had the seemingly overwhelming task of re-positioning myself. I had to communicate what was unique about me and why I was worth the menu price. And, yes, I had to find someone who would listen!

Ask my wife ... I am not the world's best communicator. But I do have 24 years of marriage under my belt to show that I can adapt. I can learn from my mistakes. I attended the school of hard knocks, took a few calculated risks and a few leaps of faith. In my pizzeria, I learned that I had to leave my 'safe zone' and communicate in ways I was unfamiliar with. That meant learning new techniques and constantly refining them. Never let someone question who you are. Whether it is your menu, Web site, USP or your pizza, let it consistently convey your message clear and understandably. If you develop your business plan honestly, your market will respond.

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