

Manzon: Adapting Quickly Key in Restaurant Business

Before becoming director of marketing for The Loop Pizza Grill in Jacksonville, Fla., in 1997, Cathy Manzon served as the director of marketing and public relations for the Columbia Restaurant Group in Tampa for nine years. She also served as the company's director of sales and marketing, general manager and catering manager. She holds a bachelor of science degree in business and marketing from the University of Massachusetts School of Hotel, Restaurant and Travel Administration.

As you've been in the foodservice business for many years, what does it take to be successful, particularly in a male-dominated industry? Did you have a mentor early on?

I think what it takes to be successful in this industry is learning early on that you always need to be one step ahead of the game and ready, willing and able for just about anything at any time. The restaurant industry and the challenges that come along with it are constantly changing, and to be

successful, you need to be willing to adapt to those changes while never skipping a beat.

I had a wonderful mentor early in my professional career. I worked at The Columbia Restaurant in Tampa for several years, and Adela Gonzmart, who was the granddaughter of the founder, was my mentor. She was in her 60s and I was in my 20s when we first met. There was nothing Adela wouldn't do for a guest or an employee. She treated everyone with respect and went out of her way to help in any situation. In turn, she was the most loved and respected business-women I knew. Talk about making a difference—she did so every day. I have always said that if I could be half the woman that Adela Gonzmart was, I would be doing pretty well for myself.

What new products and programs have you launched for The Loop Pizza Grill?

A big challenge for us a few years ago was implementing a gift

card program systemwide. Since several locations had different POS systems, this was a challenge, but ... we have a great E-Loop Club program in place now, which has really made a difference in capturing the attention of captive guests. We also rolled out a "Lite" menu a few years ago. That was a challenging one. I worked with a dietitian after the recipes were created and it took months to tweak them so that they not only tasted good and positively represented the brand but were also low in fat.

As far as new campaign products, most of them have been promotional items with LTOs (limited time offers), yet some of them have remained on the menu as core items. The two most recent ones that were quite successful were the Loop-accinos and a Mediterranean Pizza.

Loop-accinos is our line of coffee-flavored milkshakes. The Loop is very well known for its hand-dipped shakes, so this was a natural extension. This is one that has remained on the menu.

In addition to being well known for our gourmet salads—Greek being one of the top sellers—our Specialty Pizzas also are very popular. So, again, creating a Mediterranean Pizza using many of the items in our Greek salad was a perfect fit. It's difficult to create new products that will appeal to our guests because we already have such a varied menu.

I experimented with a Loop'n Cheddar Pizza for a while, a spin-off of our award-winning Loop'n Cheddar Burger, but because so many people choose to eat their burgers in so many different ways; some like ketchup, some like mayo and pickles, etc., I gave up after the 19th version! I had my favorite, but I always have to remember that just because I think it is good, does not necessarily mean it will appeal to our guests, or increase our sales.

Do you prefer to be a "behind-the-scenes" type employee? If so, does that give you a better focus on the company and the customer? How has the average American diner changed over the past decade? How has the Loop responded?

I guess I would say I like to be behind the scenes, but I also like to be in the forefront when it comes to talking with guests and employees. It really makes my job that much easier when I can learn what our guests and employees are really thinking and what they really want. It is very gratifying to have a successful campaign or program that our operators and franchisees like. Most don't know what it takes to pull off a successful campaign, and I'm OK with that. As long as it works for them and it has a positive impact, they don't need to know how it all came together. All they need to know is that we are there for them.

As far as changes in the American diner, today's average consumer is very educated and inquisitive when it comes to food and dining choices. Dietary needs

and options, along with food quality and flavor profiles, have changed dramatically over the years. Along with that, competition has increased. It is a never-ending challenge to keep up with the needs of our guests. Because of this, we ourselves have had to become more educated, responsive and creative in the way we respond to these changes.

Our employees know that we will do whatever it takes to give our guests what they



Cathy Manzon

timeshare. That was a first vacation for both of us since being in the restaurant industry, and we vowed that we would vacation in Aruba every year. We haven't

missed a year yet!

In addition to handling the marketing efforts of The Loop, I also manage public relations. Anything dealing with the public sector is 24/7. It could be a hurricane, an FDA Alert, a human resource issue or a number of other things that require immediate attention and action. For my own peace of mind, I make sure I have all of these areas covered in advance, if for some reason I am not available. Otherwise, I'm there.

Tell us a little more about your background. And if you hadn't wound up in the restaurant business, what would be your fantasy career?

I grew up in a small town in western Massachusetts. I attended the University of Massachusetts and received a BS degree in the Hotel/Restaurant division. I worked in just about every restaurant position possible, from busser, dishwasher, cook, server, kitchen manager, general manager and so on. I wanted to learn it all, and in doing that, learned that I loved it all.

If I had not ended up in the restaurant industry, I think I would have pursued my ambition to be either a personal trainer or a nutritionist.

want. We have always prepared everything to order, and are happy to prepare our menu items with any special request. We receive several e-mails and phone calls with menu item inquiries, and although we provide nutritional information for our Lite menu, it is not available for our full menu. On many occasions, I will speak with the guest directly to find out what their specific dietary needs are and from there assist them with menu choices. Allergy conditions also are on the rise, which means it is even more important to know exactly what specific items are used in the preparation of our recipes.

As a woman, what do you bring to the table, so to speak, especially as so many food decision-makers are women?

Probably the natural ability to do whatever it takes and go that extra mile in all aspects of my life and career. Relationships are important to me, as is working with a committed team. I'll jump in and help out wherever I can. It is not unusual for me to spend endless hours researching a project until I find a solution. I feel it is important to have a positive impact on people and give credit where credit is due. I also feel it is important to be surrounded by good people and employees. I hired a marketing manager a little over a year ago, and her talent and experience have not only elevated the quality of what we deliver to our franchisees, but in turn she has helped to make me look better, and that sure makes my job a whole lot easier.

How do you balance family and work?

You know, I must say I have a hard time with this. Lucky for me, my husband is also in the restaurant industry and understands having to cancel plans or staying home on the weekends to get "caught up." Sometimes the travel schedule gets to be a bit much, but with cell phones, text messages and e-mails, we always find a way to stay in touch and figure out who will water the plants that week.

When we were married almost 20 years ago, we spent our honeymoon in Aruba and purchased a

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