



The food industry experts for
retailers, foodservice operators,
and food manufacturers



Food, Wit & Wisdom™

By Dr. Marcia L. Schurer

Be Competitive or Perish

Competition is fierce for the food-away-from-home dollar. It's a 24 hour a day, 365 day a year battle for a share of the consumer's stomach and a piece of the multi-billion dollars spent each year for convenient, grab-and-go, take-out foods. Who is your competition -- everyone and anyone who sells food. The traditional distinction between foodservice providers, manufacturers and retailers is disappearing. The lines of demarcation are blurring. Who's selling what, to whom and how is in constant flux.

Prepared foods are being sold from restaurants, supermarkets, specialty food shops, wholesale clubs, drugstores, health clubs, bookstores, convenience stores, airports, train stations, gas stations, department stores, discount stores, malls, sports arenas -- the list is endless. And it's being sold ready-to-eat, ready-to-heat, ready-to-cook or prepared from express stations, kiosks, service cases, self-service cases, cafes, food and beverage bars, drive-thrus, catalogs, the internet and personal home chefs. The competition is everywhere.

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Driven by busy lifestyles, lack of knowledge or desire to cook and the time pressures of a fast paced economy, today's consumers are demanding fresh prepared foods that are convenient to eat, delicious to taste, priced for value, and quick to purchase. The challenge for retailers, foodservice operators and manufacturers is to meet these needs while establishing customer loyalty, distinct product positioning and bottom-line profits. And to provide these products in a friendly, courteous and entertaining environment and do it better than their competition.

Research Your Competition, Market and Food

So if you haven't already done it, now is the time to do it. Get to know everything you possibly can about your competition - who you think they are and who your customers think they are. Whether you're just starting out with one idea, product or location or you've got a business portfolio of multiple concepts, products, programs and sales locations, examine your competition. Examine your local, regional, national, and international trading areas - current and potentially in the future.

Whether you are a foodservice operator, retailer or manufacturer, you've got to stay on top of all the changes, innovations, trends and new competition in the food industry. That means attending workshops, trade shows, reading trade magazines, surfing the internet, reading what your customers read and making a continuous investment in your education and learning experiences. Having the right information can make the difference in your business.

Witness the Food Experience From Your Customer's Viewpoint

Next, research your competition and your customer market. Go where your consumers go - where they shop and eat. Witness the food experience through their senses - what they see, taste, smell, hear and touch. Walk and ride through their neighborhoods -- where they live, work, and play. Stop and visit every place you can where food is being sold and feel the food experience. Observe your customers in person instead of relying solely on marketing data.

Today's consumers are experiencing new taste sensations and new food experiences.

And while you are there, take the time to observe what's going on around you. Sample some of the food (eat some there and take some home), watch the customers, ask some questions, observe the operations, collect printed brochures and menus, take a few pictures if you can, and take notes, lots of notes so you will remember. Then you've got to evaluate and analyze your results.

But don't stop with your local area, get out and see what's going on in other cities, states, regions, and countries.

Today's consumers are experiencing new taste sensations and new food experiences. They are traveling to different kinds of places and to different parts of the world. They are taking those experiences and bringing them back home, sharing them with family and friends. Why not take the lead with a new trend instead of rushing to catch up with your competition?

Points to Consider

Each time you visit a new place or try a new product, try asking yourself the following 10 questions:

Competitive Audit: Short Version

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- What's the total food experience?
- What's the concept or program?
- What is the menu or product mix and how does it meet the consumers' needs?
- How do your products or your menu items compare in taste, price, variety, and presentation?
- How are they signed and merchandised?
- What are your competitors' marketing strategies?
- Who are their customers and how satisfied do they look?
- How is their customer service?
- How fast, convenient and enjoyable is the shopping and eating experience?
- What are their strengths and weaknesses and how can you do it better than they do it?

Each time you finish researching, analyzing, and evaluating one of your competitors, go back and review your own products, programs, operations, and locations and see how you compare. The economy, the customer, the trends and the competition are continuously changing. You've got to stay up-to-date and ahead of the competition. You've got to be competitive or perish.

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