

Learn how to earn the gluten-free community's lucrative business



You've seen the stats that say 1 in 133 Americans has celiac disease, and you've heard the tales from other operators reporting that sales have grown by double digits since they added gluten-free options. So you've added these items to your menu, too—or, at least, you're seriously considering a leap into the gluten-free fray. Easy, right?

Not so fast—adding gluten-free menu items is only part of the process. The fact is, you still have to get these customers in your door and keep them coming back, all while encouraging them to let the gluten-free community know your pizzeria is a safe

haven that makes their dietary needs a priority. Fortunately, with some patience, a display of genuine concern and a few savvy marketing tactics to spread the word, you can not only attract these customers but generate an entirely new (and very loyal) following for your pizzeria.

Understanding the Market

For those with celiac disease, a gluten-free lifestyle is the only “treatment” available, and in recent years products that target this population have exploded onto the scene, with no signs of slowing. Thus, according to some, it’s a no-brainer to offer gluten-free foods. “Gluten-free has become so popular these days, so offering these options attracts and maintains new guests,” says Cathy Manzon, marketing director for The Loop Pizza Grill (looppizzagrill.com), based in Jacksonville, Florida. “There are a lot of people who have to choose gluten-free products based on their dietary needs.”

Then there are those customers who have gone gluten-free as a dietary choice rather than on doctor's orders—plus the much larger number of customers who know someone who is on a gluten-free diet but still craves pizza and pasta. Best of all, those who require gluten-free foods make extremely loyal customers when they find a pizzeria that offers the safe handling practices and great-tasting food they seek—and they're often the ones in a group who select where to eat. “Gluten-free diners make the reservations and bring in guests; then they spread the word through social media, because this is a very active community,” says Beckee Moreland, director of gluten-free industry initiatives for the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness (NFCA), based in Ambler, Pennsylvania. “By offering gluten-free items, you fill a specific need for a very specific customer, so they'll seek you out and tell their friends, who will travel from farther distances to visit your pizzeria.”

But keep in mind that these customers now have more choices than they used to, and the competition is getting stiffer. “Just because you offer a solution, it doesn’t mean people are going to eat anything you serve,” says Steven Negri, owner of Mandy’s Pizza & More (mandypizza.com) in Pittsburgh. “Besides a safe environment, these customers are looking for great taste, texture and pricing. Gluten-free customers can be pickier now, so it’s more important than ever to truly understand the market.”

Showing You Care

Many gluten-free customers have been burned in the past by foods that restaurant operators falsely claimed were gluten-free, so it’s crucial that you show you’re genuinely concerned about them and do everything in your power to meet their special needs. Even a single bad experience will spread like wildfire, so make sure you have strict standards in the kitchen to avoid possible cross-contamination.

Moreland suggests showing you care about this segment by offering not just gluten-free pizza, but something gluten-free for each part of your menu, from appetizers to desserts. Even more importantly, she adds, make sure your staff is trained to know what gluten-free customers are looking for and how to answer questions—a must to build trust with these customers and create a consistent message that you’re concerned about their needs. “These customers will call ahead and ask questions, and if they get a bad feeling about the establishment, they won’t visit, so everybody in the restaurant must have a good understanding of gluten-free,” she says. “Plus, gluten-free customers love going somewhere to eat where they don’t have to explain their condition; they just want to be normal customers.”

Partnering with a brand that’s already established in the gluten-free market can also lend credibility to your gluten-free commitment. At Austin, Texas-based Johnny Carino’s Italian Restaurants (carinos.com), with more than 100 locations in the United States and abroad, the gluten-free menu was recently expanded with the addition of pasta and pizza from a well-known supplier. “We want to provide the best products possible, so we partnered with a strong brand, Udi’s, for our pizza crusts,” says Ryan Bearden, VP of marketing for Fired Up Restaurant Concepts, which owns Johnny Carino’s. “The company also has a gold mine of an email and Facebook following, and they have promoted us within those channels because we carry their products.”

Johnny Carino’s also had its executive chef go through a rigorous process to certify foods as gluten-free and establish proper procedures to be followed at all locations to avoid cross-contamination. The company works with Analytical Food Laboratories to test everything on its menu and ensures that guests are informed on menus about the restaurant’s strict protocol for the safest products possible. “These customers talk a lot, so it’s imperative to follow protocol consistently,” Bearden says. “You have to be committed to a great product and a safe environment, because there’s no better marketing than word-of-mouth.”

Creating a Buzz

Chances are, customers won’t know that you offer gluten-free options unless you tell them at every opportunity. Johnny Carino’s servers make sure to leave a gluten-free menu at each table—“a great way to build word-of-mouth,” Bearden says. After all, even if no one at that table is a gluten-free customer, they probably know someone who is. Other in-store tactics, including table tents, POP materials and servers’ recommendations, have helped those with celiac, and their friends and family members, become familiar with the options.

When The Loop first introduced gluten-free pizza, each location offered small samples and used Facebook and its email club to spread the word. “Effective marketing tools include using great photography in our print ads and within our four walls, but we also sent out \$3-off coupons to give our guests incentive to try it,” Manzon recalls. “We use a lot of flyers that we include with all to-go orders and on pizza boxes, and we use in-store counter cards that make the pizza very appealing.”

Execs at Johnny Carino’s also let people know about the expanded menu offerings through its email database, text message marketing and press releases sent to specialty and local publications. But one of the company’s most creative—and successful—tactics targeted gluten-free bloggers. “This hits a very specific audience, so we invited them to try the menu and then blog about it; the blog then hits the people who care the most,” Bearden explains. “Bloggers gave us a very good response.”

Another great place to find potential gluten-free customers: local celiac support groups. Moreland reports that most towns have them (look in surrounding areas, too—remember, these customers are willing to travel farther than most). You can then invite the group out for a special dinner or tasting at your pizzeria or host a celiac awareness night. “You’ll establish that you care about these customers, and you can get great feedback on your products as well, because they’re the experts,” Moreland says.

Other ideas Moreland recommends: Invite a local gluten-free producer or baker to come to your pizzeria and answer customers’ questions, or host a rep from a celiac organization to answer questions about your restaurant’s training. You should also mention your offerings on your website, get your pizzeria listed on gluten-free travel or dining apps, and look into certifications or staff training programs from celiac organizations.

Negri, whose son Brandon copes with severe food allergies, agrees that establishing yourself in the gluten-free community is a must to reach these customers; he speaks at conferences to raise awareness and regularly hosts holiday-themed events for kids (such as allergen-free trick or treating or doughnuts with Santa parties). He also tells his son’s story on the back of menus to explain and demonstrate his personal commitment to allergen-free items. In fact, Negri recommends that, before operators even offer gluten-free foods, they should reach out to local support groups for celiac disease. “Contact the person in charge and have them come in to sit down with you and discuss their condition. Ask them what foods they miss most; ask where they’ve eaten gluten-free and what they do or don’t like about those places,” he suggests. “Find out the group’s next meeting date and ship a bunch of pizzas for them to try. When you get the support of support groups, they’ll do grassroots marketing for you because you cared enough to ask.” When your menu items are established, you can then send out a press release to other local media and support groups touting your new options, he adds.

Finally, if you have a loyal gluten-free customer or family member that can act as an informal spokesperson for your efforts, don’t hesitate to make them a part of your message, too. Negri has found success (to the tune of 300-plus gluten-free pizzas sold at Mandy’s Pizza & More per week) by making it clear to customers that his son can eat Mandy’s allergen-free offerings; the customers are more apt to trust a recommendation from someone who shares their concerns, he says. “It’s always an advantage to have someone to put a face to your message, or build up customers who will recommend you online through Facebook, blogs, etc.,” Negri explains. “Ultimately, you have to care and build a rapport with these customers—not just sell or give them a bunch of PR fluff.”

When you develop your recipes and procedures carefully, create buzz about your gluten-free menu, and show a real commitment to making sure these customers are safe and satisfied, you can easily find yourself with an

entirely new loyal following. In fact, Negri has one final piece of advice to make sure these customers are kept happy: “Be prepared, because as soon as people find out about your food, you’ll have a very long line!”