A “How To” Guide to Restaurant Catering
Catering Brings Opportunity to the Table

Today’s special occasions call for great food in a casual setting.

And you’re invited to provide it!

As gatherings move from formal venues to homes and offices, time-pressed consumers are turning to their favorite restaurants to provide the food they love with the convenience and value they need.

Get the party started and wow customers in new ways by catering to the need for trays, platters, boxed lunches, and bundled menus that transport the restaurant experience from your table to theirs.

Break beyond your four walls

Consumer catering is a $27.5 billion opportunity. Catering that’s picked up or delivered for service off-site expands business well beyond the number of tables in your restaurant. And, because you already have expertise, equipment, and employees, you’re well on your way to getting started. Consider catering’s potential to:

• Build brand awareness
• Acquire new customers
• Gain more business from existing customers
• Strengthen customer relationships and loyalty by meeting additional needs
• Create dependable new revenue streams from standing orders
A “How To” Guide to Restaurant Catering

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Placing orders must be easy and predictable for customers. Follow up after each catering order with a call.

Erle Dardick, catering consultant and author, 2013
Cater to many occasions

Consumers are looking for a broader variety of catering options to suit many kinds of occasions, according to the latest research data from Technomic Inc. Great food, dependability, and convenience make any gathering more enjoyable—whether it’s a crowd that needs pleasing or a more intimate gathering.

- Anniversary parties
- At-home dinner parties
- Baby showers
- Backyard barbecues
- Birthday parties
- Bridal showers
- Business meetings
- Business entertaining
- Club meetings
- Cocktail parties
- College get-togethers
- Cookouts
- Engagement parties
- Family meals
- Family reunions
- Funerals
- Going-away parties
- Graduation parties
- Holiday meals (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Mother’s Day, etc.)
- House parties
- Housewarming parties
- Picnics
- Real-estate showings/open houses
- Rehearsal dinners
- Tailgate parties/sporting events
Selections for every catering need

Get creative. Whether it’s an à la carte star attraction or the entire menu, make catering an irresistible choice—and your restaurant the preferred provider.

• Hot and cold appetizers
• Bakery trays
• Barbecue platters
• Beverages (coffee, hot or iced tea, hot chocolate, bottled water, juices, smoothies)
• Boxed/bagged lunches
• Breakfast trays/hot breakfast/brunch entrées
• Cheese plates
• Complete holiday menus (e.g., “Turkey with all the fixings”)
• Crudités platters
• Deli/sandwich trays
• Dessert trays
• Frozen entrées
• Hot entrée pans and platters
• Kebab trays
• Pasta bars
• Penny-pincher party packs
• Prepacked picnics
• Salad trays
• Seasonal specials
• Sharing-plates items
• Snacks
• Weekend-getaway/cottage kits
• Whole roasted items (presliced ham, whole roast lamb, rotisserie chickens, roast turkeys, etc.)

Food quality and freshness are the most critical drivers when it comes to choosing a caterer.

Technomic Inc.
The Takeout & Off-Premise Dining Consumer Trend Report.
Getting Started

Devote time, resources, and planning specifically to the catering side of your business. Whether you start small by selling just one signature dish à la carte, or launch large with a full catering menu, the following steps position your operation for success.

1. **Step 1. Focus on the opportunity**
   - Scope out your geographic area to discover prospects with catering needs.
   - Study the competition to discover catering niches you can fill.

2. **Step 2. Create a catering business plan**

   This essential document defines your business and is the roadmap for going forward with everything from adding menu items to business expansion. Among other things, it will:
   - Outline your catering revenue/profit goals.
   - Identify your target market.
   - Define your catering style.
   - Survey the competitive landscape.
   - Map out marketing strategies.

3. **Step 3. Assess catering’s impact on your operation**
   - Logistically, how much additional volume can you handle?
   - Is extra staff required to hit your catering goals?
   - Are new levels of expertise needed?
   - Are there additional equipment/inventory needs?
   - Do workstations need updating?
   - Will catering change the workflow/footprint of your operation?
   - How do catering peak times overlap with regular restaurant peak times?
Step 4. Craft a craveable catering menu

- Tailor catering options to your market's needs.
- Create a mix that's convenient for customers and easy for staff:
  - Frozen prepared items that can be picked up well in advance of events,
  - Hot, ready-to-serve items,
  - Refrigerated, easily reheated items,
  - Grab-and-go refrigerated and baked-goods items.
- Add inexpensive options that accommodate tightened budgets and expense accounts.
- Include options for customers with food allergies or other dietary restrictions.
- Facilitate customizations: Technomic Inc. reports that 27% of customers would use catering more frequently if they had a greater hand in customization.
- If possible (and advisable), also allow ordering off the regular menu. Key menu considerations:
  - Portability
  - Appearance
  - How well the food travels
  - Ease of handling/service for the customer
  - Food costs/pricing/profitability
- Offer a variety of sizes: serves 4-6, 6-8, 8-12, etc.

RECOMMENDED
Grilled or roasted meats, especially with sauce that holds in moisture
Braised dishes
Pastas
Casseroles
Hearty bean, whole-grain, and legume dishes
Take-and-bake or take-and-reheat items
Roasted vegetables
Salads
Sturdy desserts

NOT RECOMMENDED
Breaded items
Fried items (unless they’re in large pieces, such as fried chicken)
Delicate fish dishes
Highly perishable foods
Fragile desserts
Fragile vegetables that don’t hold well (e.g., asparagus)
Step 5. Gear up

Food quality and freshness are the most critical drivers for 86 percent of consumers when choosing a catering vendor, according to Technomic Inc. That means that how the food is packaged and how it’s held matters as much as preparation.

Food must be in pristine condition and look appetizing on arrival. Remember, catered food is an ambassador for your brand—if it’s not perfect, customers will think less of your restaurant and may never visit or come back again. These essential prep and packaging tools keep food at its best:

- Instant-read thermometers
- Temperature gauges
- Temperature logs
- Hot boxes, refrigerators, freezers, and other holding equipment
- Insulated carriers with easily closed doors and latches for transport
- Full-size aluminum containers with secure-fitting lids
- Best-quality, leakproof packaging that keeps food at the proper temperature and is easy for consumers to manage
- “Green” takeout packaging if sustainability is important to your customer base
- Disposable cutlery, napkins, cups, and plates
- Food trucks/delivery vehicles with hot boxes and/or refrigeration/freezers
- Serving equipment—chafing dishes, coolers, carafes, etc.—as value-added loaners or rentals

Look after sleepy clients—customers who order less than once per month. They will actually make up a good chunk of your revenue, especially around the holidays.

Erle Dardick, catering consultant and author, 2013
Step 6. Set pricing

Because less service is required, catering items that are picked up should carry a lower price tag than those for on-site catering or delivery, but will likely be priced higher than your restaurant’s menu items. Guard your margins by taking the following into consideration:

- Factor all costs—extra staffing, materials, packaging, additional marketing, and transport, as well as traditional food costs—into your catering pricing.
- Consider tiered pricing for large orders, which offer economies of scale. For example, the per-person cost for pulled pork will be slightly lower for a 200-person event than for one with 50. Traditional tier-pricing levels are: fewer than 50 people; 50 to 150; and 150 or more.
- Offer custom pricing for any special menus you create. Give customers price-level options (e.g., “value,” “traditional,” and “premium.”)
- Benchmark catering pricing in your immediate area to assess the competitive environment.
- Use pricing software, such as Cater Ease™, Total Party Planner™, and Catering Pro for pricing help.

Technomic Inc., The Takeout & Off-Premise Dining Consumer Trend Report.
Step 7. Train for rigorous service standards

Top-notch service, accurate orders, and on-time availability/delivery are essential to successful catering efforts.

- Designate a central point of contact for catering orders.
- Train for order-taking accuracy and effective communication with the kitchen.
- Institute service standard for quality and consistent prep times.
- Make sure staff is knowledgeable about all prep times and methods in order to set customer expectations accordingly.
- Train staff how to package and present catered food correctly and consistently.
- Manage customer relationships. Train staff in the importance of customer satisfaction and how to appropriately deal with questions and complaints.

Step 8. Follow up

- Reach out to customers to thank them for their orders.
- Gather feedback via comment cards and online surveys.
- Reward loyalty with frequent-buyer programs that build repeat business.
- Fix glitches. Contact customers, apologize, and make things right when issues arise.

Which restaurants or retail stores would you consider for catering orders?

Technomic Inc.  
The Takeout & Off-Premise Dining Consumer Trend Report.
Step 9. Get the word out

• Stay true to your brand. Offer the food that made you famous. Maintain your brand “voice” in all communications.

• Brand everything. Display your catering logo, phone number, website, and email address prominently on menus, packaging, and delivery vehicles.

• Cross-promote. Include your catering information on your restaurant signage, menus, table tents, etc. Include your restaurant’s information on all catering materials.

• Get social. Create a Facebook page for your catering. Tweet about your gigs. Post food photos to Pinterest. Target prospects. Send flyers, faxes, emails, menus, and tasty samples to local businesses and other organizations.

• Leverage holiday, national-event, and special-occasion business. Let customers know how you can make entertaining easier, whether it’s Thanksgiving, the Super Bowl, or a graduation.

• Promote your expertise as a “value-add.” Let customers know you can help them choose the right menus and quantities.

• Alert the media. Send out press-releases when you add catering services or enhance your offerings.

• Add sizzle to promotions with seasonal and other limited-time offers. “Get-them before-they-get-away” specials can be powerful tools for building sales and buzz.

• Leave your business cards, flyers, and/or sample menus behind for prospects.

Make your catering message known—80% of your customer base lives or works within a 10-minute drive, so your store’s physical environment is a key marketing tool.

Erle Dardick, catering consultant and author, 2013
Best Practices

Be up-front
• List terms and conditions on your website and menus.
• Note price differences between regular and catering menus.
• Set guests’ expectations for what’s included and what’s extra.
• Include food-handling information on your catering website and menus.

Use checklists for everything
• Orders and order forms
• Customer contacts
• Planning tools
• Equipment
• Recipes
• Packaging
• Deliveries
• Staff (permanent and temporary)
• Backup plans (supplies, transportation, staff, etc.)

Emphasize convenience
• Easy ordering by phone, fax, text, online, and email
• Easy pickup in a pleasant, designated area
• Standing orders—auto-paid/filled
• No guesswork, thanks to bundles (e.g., serves four to six, 10 to 12, etc.)
• Beverages as add-on options—this increases your attractiveness as a one-stop shopping venue

Offer value
• Coupons, discounts, and group deals
• Limited-time offers such as complimentary add-ons with large orders
• Complimentary delivery

Young men are more than twice as likely as other consumers to order catered meals for business occasions on a monthly basis.

Technomic Inc.,
The Takeout & Off-Premise Dining Consumer Trend Report, 2011.
Keep food safe

Cooling hot food that will be reheated
*Proper cooling techniques prevent the growth of harmful bacteria.*

- Cool potentially hazardous foods from 135°F to 70°F within two hours, and from 70°F to 41°F within four hours (six hours total).
- Chill food to below 41°F before transport.
- For large batches: divide food into small batches, place it in a small metal pan in the refrigerator, freezer, or ice-water bath, and stir often to dissipate heat.

Transporting food

- Make sure transporters are clean and rust-free to prevent harmful bacteria growth.
- Preheat or pre-chill transporters according to manufacturers’ instructions before loading.
- Use shallow pans (2–2 ½-inch deep) with fitted lids.
- Document adequate temperature/humidity controls for all perishable and potentially hazardous foods.
- Pack hot and cold items separately.
- Document the food temperature on arrival.

Instructing customers about safe food-handling

- Provide information that keeps food at its best.
- Label food with instructions for reheating, holding, refrigerating, and handling the food:
  - Reheat hot food to 165°F and maintain at a safe temperature of 135°F, or above.
  - Cold food should be held at 41°F, or below.
  - Stick to the “two-hour rule”: Do not leave perishable food out for more than two hours (one hour if the temperature exceeds 90°F).
  - Use within three to four days.
  - Verify reheating/holding temperatures with an instant-read thermometer.
  - Offer cheat sheets (in addition to food-container labels) that spell out safe food-handling practices.
  - Post food-handling instructions to your website.
  - Provide food-handling gloves for anyone serving food.

For more food-safety information:

- Go to GFS Experience® at gfs.com for food-safety information, training modules, sanitation forms, logs, and more.
- Contact the Gordon Food Service® Nutrition Resource Center at (800) 968-4426 with food-safety questions.
Build a Bigger Catering Business

Ask your Customer Development Specialist about our suite of Catalyst® services that can help you grow your catering sales:

**LTO Direct™.** This makes it easy to create appetizing, attractive, and sales-building branded Limited Time Offer signage, table tents, comment cards, and more using our colorful, professionally photographed images.

**Text Ripple.** Reach catering prospects and customers with cost-effective mobile marketing that keeps you at the top of their list as a catering-solution provider for seasonal and occasion-based needs.

**Total Loyalty Solutions.** Reward customers and get the word out about your brand and your catering services with gift and frequent-buyer cards, email marketing, catering website design, direct mail, and promotional items.

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Catering is big business for restaurants; they capture almost five times the revenue of retailers for off-site events—

**$19.3 billion annually versus $4.0 billion.**

Technomic Inc. Parties Off Premise study, 2013
CATERING TIP NO. 10

Don’t deviate from your brand and stay true to the food you’re known for—customers expect the same quality, service, and foods when you cater their events.

— National Restaurant Association, 2012

Limited- and Full-service restaurants hold the largest shares of the catering market and appear to be taking share from independent caterers and retail foodservice operators.

Technomic Inc. Parties Off Premise study.