




**Flavor and the Menu**  
**Spring, 2009**  
**75,000 Impressions**

FLAVOR PARTNERS

**FLAVOR** Some of the most successful menu specials are created with a hand from commodity boards

**Collaboration**

BY JOAN LANG



The National Pork Board's effort to put more of its protein on restaurant tables got a boost with Tropical Smoothie's recent Cubano-inspired sandwich promotion.

In this challenging economy, limited-time offers (LTOs), promotions and menu specials are more important than ever. These marketing tools help operators engage consumer interest, build sales, protect the brand identity of core menu items and test potential menu additions. Commodity boards and other foodservice-marketing organizations can help keep menus on-trend and profitable.

"There's a long list of potential partners out there, [ranging from] beef to blueberries to rice," says Judy Dudley, director of marketing for Au Bon Pain, which recently partnered with the Hazelnut Marketing Board to create a hazelnut-fudge cookie, hazelnut vinaigrette and several other successful LTOs.

"Even if they don't have a big budget, they and the agencies that represent them are very marketing savvy and can provide all kinds of benefits, including exposure and branding appeal," notes Dudley.

The mission of commodity boards and other marketing organizations is to serve the producers and industries they represent. These groups encompass many ingredients, including commodities like pork and soybeans, as well as place-specific agricultural products, such as Vidalia onions, and specialty items like olive oil and cheese.

By promoting short- and long-term growth through strategic investment in research, marketing and education programs, boards can offer everything from off-the-rack, foodservice-tested recipes and promotional materials to entirely bespoke menu items and promotions — with marketing dollars to back them.

#### PROFITS FROM PORK

In some cases, the organization's mission is to help source product. For instance, the National Pork Board, which is

supported by the Pork Checkoff program, funded by producers' per-animal contributions, has spent the last several years focusing on new products designed to get more pork on more tables, reports Paul Perfilio, the board's national foodservice-marketing manager.

To that end, the board worked with Destin, Fla.-based Tropical Smoothie Café on several new fresh-pork items, including a Kinda Cubano sandwich. Filled with Cuban-style, sliced, roasted pork loin, capicola, Swiss cheese and bistro sauce, along with fresh greens, tomato and banana peppers on a toasted ciabatta, it has become part of the 260-plus-unit chain's new Bistro Sandwiches menu. The Kinda Cubano is promoted in part through the use of the iconic Pork logo on menu boards and printed menus.

"Prior to this, Tropical Smoothie hadn't worked with any pork except ham," notes Perfilio. "We introduced [the company] to a variety of minimally processed, fully cooked pork products that would help make the sandwich operationally easy to produce."

R&D experts at the chain eventually selected a presliced, roasted and seasoned pork-loin product and tested other pork-based items, including a flatbread sandwich that can carry a lower price point. For a chain, the value of such assistance is considerable, but support exists at every conceivable level.

#### MUSHROOMING SALES

"We've done programs worth anywhere from \$5,000 to \$75,000 or more for a national chain or a really big project," says Alexei Rudolf of San Francisco-based Edelman public-relations firm, speaking on behalf of the Mushroom Council. An initiative with a major, national, quick-serve chain represented an 18-month commitment

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A recent Mushroom Council-funded text-messaging campaign helped spread the word about the Southwest Philly burrito special at Moe's Southwest Grill.



in terms of both menu development and marketing assistance.

"Part of the criteria is not just building sales and volume of product sold but also reaching consumers and raising their general awareness," adds Rudolph, who has worked with a number of commodity-marketing organizations. "That's why we might focus on a server-incentive program, for instance, rather than just a limited-time offer or other menu items.

"In the case of Applebee's, we were essentially paying the waitstaff to talk about mushrooms by providing them with a tip card that provided five selling strategies. That's invaluable exposure, which is hard to get from any other means."

An LTO can provide more than just a new menu item. Atlanta-based Moe's Southwest Grill ran a recent Phil E. burrito and quesadilla program in partnership with the Mushroom Council, which also gave the chain entrée into the mobile advertising medium.

"We've been wanting to try text messaging, but it wasn't in this year's budget," says Sara Riggsby, director of marketing for Moe's, a 400-plus unit Mexican fast-casual chain that recently came under the Focus

Brands umbrella, along with Carvel, Cinnabon and Schlotzky's.

Available from March 2 through May 31, 2009, the Phil E. menu items feature traditional Philly cheese steak ingredients — sirloin steak, sizzling peppers, onions, mushrooms and shredded cheese — with the Southwestern twist of queso and a warm tortilla. The edgy chain's first text-messaging campaign, targeting a portion of the population that doesn't clip coupons, offered \$2 off a Phil E. purchase when a guest texted "MOES" to 46786.

"Part of the strategy with LTOs at Moe's is to build excitement and sales by finding a common product and putting a Southwestern twist on it," explains Riggsby, noting that the Mushroom Council has been actively courting Moe's ever since a chance industry meeting two years ago. The chain already carried mushrooms, so a new menu item featuring the ingredient made perfect sense.

The Mushroom Council footed the bill for a text-messaging company that worked with Moe's existing database on managing and fulfilling the initiative.

"Redemptions have been excellent, and the idea is that recipients will forward the message

Blueberry nutrition facts printed on Planet Smoothie cups created a mobile messaging system and brought extra attention to the chain's blueberry-packed smoothies.



to friends and talk it up," says Riggsby. "Because we're ahead of the competition now on text messaging, it helps boost our image and build brand equity for Moe's among the kind of customers we're interested in."

Although it's too soon to tell what the final sales results will be, Riggsby reports that a franchisee who experimented with text messaging on another initiative realized a \$2,000-a-week increase in single-store sales.

Small wonder that the boards are actively courting chain partnerships.

"Basically, we work like national account salespeople on behalf of the commodity board," says Rudolf.

"In general, we're looking for chains that are either using a lot of mushrooms already and can increase their usage with new products, or we're looking to introduce the ingredient.

"Seasonal and limited-time offerings are among the easiest avenues, because they exist for a defined period of time that can be tracked and measured."