

Marketing strategies of restaurants for attracting guests in Belgrade, Serbia

Đorđe ĐORĐEVIĆ^{1*}, Aleksandar BOŽIĆ², Saša MAŠIĆ¹

¹Academy of Applied Studies, The College of Hotel Management, Belgrade, Serbia

²High School for Tourism, Belgrade, Serbia

*e-mail: djordjevic.djordje98@gmail.com

Abstract

The importance of marketing in the restaurant business and the rapid changes in trends require research into how the combination of different marketing channels affects success in attracting new guests. This research focuses on identifying the effectiveness of different marketing approaches: the impact of reviews, loyalty programs, presence on food delivery platforms, targeting specific target groups through thematic restaurants (as niche entertainment and events industries). The research model sets 5 hypotheses that were tested on a total sample of 45 respondents from Belgrade. A closed questionnaire (in Google Forms), written in Serbian, consisting of 7 key segments, was used for data collection. Research conducted in the period from November to December 2024. Data analysis showed a moderately positive relationship between attitudes about the importance of reviews and loyalty programs, as well as a significant impact of word of mouth recommendations on the choice of restaurants among the younger population, as well as a positive impact of social networks.

Keywords

Marketing strategies, Branding, Management, Digital marketing, Attracting guests

Trak

Operational Innovations

Focus of the paper

Empirical

Type of submission

Paper

Introduction

The basic idea of marketing is that organizations survive and thrive by satisfying the needs and wishes of customers. This important perspective is known as the Marketing Concept, which is the highest level of philosophy and business orientation that concerns the alignment of a company's capabilities with the wishes of customers. A truly marketing-oriented enterprise is in fact expertly designed to facilitate the application of the Marketing Concept as a philosophy and way of doing business (Whalley, 2010). Marketing strategy is the process by which an organization aligns its operations with the market it has chosen to serve (Fifield, 2008). The primary focus of marketing strategy is the effective allocation and coordination of marketing resources and activities to achieve the organization's objectives within a specific product market. Thus, a key issue regarding the scope of a marketing strategy is the identification of the target market for a particular product or product line. Also, organizations strive for competitive advantage and synergy through a well-integrated program of the basic elements of the marketing mix (mainly the 4Ps: product, price, distribution and promotion) tailored to the demands and needs of potential customers in that target market (Kumar, 2021).

Restaurants must retain existing customers and build relationships with new customers in order to survive in today's competitive market conditions. Accordingly, the restaurant implements strategies for marketing its products and services on different platforms and distribution channels. The owner/manager of the restaurant is responsible for evaluating his business through a SWOT analysis and identifying the key areas on which the restaurant needs to work. When planning marketing activities, a restaurant must thoroughly evaluate its costs before investing in digital marketing, paid promotions and developing marketing techniques that will influence consumers through all available social networks.

Consumer evaluations derived from online reviews have the potential to assist company management in identifying and addressing deficiencies arising from customer complaints. Positive evaluations can help companies formulate strategies to improve customer loyalty. Therefore, information obtained from customer evaluations posted on the Internet has significant value for companies, as it serves as one of the main sources of feedback to improve performance and ensure long-term business sustainability (Sukmana, 2023).

One of the industries that stand out for its creativity and design is the restaurant industry, which is characterized by the emergence of thematic restaurants. Thematic restaurants are defined as a systematic concept or a holistic description of the materialization of space for consumption. Thematic restaurants are places to eat that are decorated with various and distinctive signs. The attractiveness of the thematic restaurant is achieved by its recognizable layout and decoration. These physical attributes play a significant role in shaping guest perception and behavior. Physical appearance, interior decoration and consumption situation, known as servicescape, create a certain impression on the guest and influence the decision-making process. In other words, servicescape performance can be considered quality, which is a key factor in consumption intentions (Anggraeni, 2020).

Mrkosová (2011) states that a Loyalty program is a marketing tool used to strengthen the loyalty of existing customers and build trust with future customers. According to the benefits provided, loyalty programs are divided into: 1) Gift loyalty programs (free gifts and free samples); 2) Discount loyalty programs (discount on the next purchase, discounts, vouchers for goods, reduced prices, etc.); 3) Rebate loyalty programs (discount for goods in exact value); 4) Combined loyalty programs (consumers become members of a loyalty club, often represented by a loyalty card on which points are collected).

In the era of digital transformation, technology has revolutionized the way consumers interact with businesses. Meal ordering has seen a significant change with the introduction of food delivery apps, which provide users with a quick and easy way to get their favorite meals delivered to their doorstep. In a competitive industry, the success of these apps depends on their ability to attract and retain users. Food delivery apps use online promotional tactics to improve customer satisfaction and encourage user adoption (Jarcia, 2024). The food delivery app phenomenon is one of the fastest growing categories in the mobile app market, which is experiencing exponential growth. In the Asian market, online food delivery market revenue is expected to reach US\$640.40 billion by the end of 2024, with a projected market value of US\$936.30 billion by 2028, with a CAGR of 9.58% (Sharma, 2023). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of food delivery services, driven by the need for businesses to survive in challenging circumstances. This highlights the ability of the food industry to withstand and adapt to difficult situations. According to Ray (2019), online food delivery services include ordering and transporting food from various outlets such as stores, restaurants or cafes, through websites or mobile delivery applications.

This research focuses on identifying the key factors that influence the choice of guests when choosing a restaurant, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of different marketing approaches such as the influence of reviews, loyalty programs, and presence on food delivery platforms and targeting specific target groups through thematic restaurants as a niche of the entertainment and events industry. Through the analysis of these strategies, the research will provide recommendations for improving marketing strategies in the hospitality industry, as well as identifying strategies that have lost their impact today and were applied a decade ago. The primary objective of this research is to identify the marketing strategies that have the greatest impact on attracting customers' attention and on their decisions when choosing a restaurant. A secondary goal is to identify marketing segments that have been applied as a standard in the last 10 years but do not have as much impact today due to the rapid changes in current trends.

Based on information from literature and own experience we hypothesize that:

H1: Restaurants that use digital marketing have a higher rate of attracting new guests than those that rely on traditional marketing channels.

H2: Restaurants with specific thematic offers attract a larger number of targeted guests.

H3: The use of promotions and discounts directly affects the increase in the number of visits to the restaurant, especially among the younger population.

H4: Positive reviews and ratings on platforms such as Google Reviews and TripAdvisor have a significant impact on attracting new guests and increasing the loyalty of existing guests.

H5: The presence of restaurants on online platforms for food delivery is a powerful marketing channel in attracting new guests.

Methodology

Data collection was carried out in November and December 2024. It is based on a closed-type survey in the Serbian language that was created in Google Forms. The questionnaire was sent to the e-mail addresses of 150 students of the College of Hotel Management who were selected according to the criteria of living and working in the territory of the city of Belgrade. A total of 45 respondents filled out the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed to consist of 7 segments and a total of 16 questions. The first segment (3 questions) refers to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second segment (3 questions) related to the respondents' previous experiences, their previous habits and preferences when choosing a restaurant. The third segment (2 questions) related to restaurant reviews, their influence and importance when making decisions about choosing a restaurant. The fourth segment (2 questions) related to the motivational factors of special offers and loyalty programs and their importance in creating a community of loyal guests. The fifth segment (2 questions) related to food delivery platforms as a marketing channel when increasing restaurant sales due to the availability of the offer to guests at any time, regardless of their current location. The sixth segment (set of questions) includes thematic restaurants as a niche of the entertainment and events industry that focus on specific target groups when creating marketing campaigns.

The survey is of a closed type where the respondents can choose the offered answers to the questions in order to collect statistical data. The questions related to the importance of certain segments were formulated on the basis of a Likert scale of 1 - 5, where 1 represents not at all important and 5 extremely important. Questions that identify key factors are designed as multiple-choice questions where respondents can mark more than one answer. Also, there are questions where users need to mark only one answer offered in order to identify and classify the single most significant factor.

The data were processed using descriptive statistics, where the average values (Mean) and standard deviations (SD) were calculated for four different items (Importance of reviews; Importance of loyalty programs; Importance of food delivery platforms; Importance of thematic restaurants) related to the importance of certain factors in the choice of restaurants. Also, the degree of correlation between these factors was determined, by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient, which indicates how interconnected these factors are.

Results and discussion

Demographic characteristics of the sample (Table 1) showed that 53.3% of respondents were women (n = 24). The largest percentage of respondents were aged 18-24 (n = 25, 55.3%). The average age is 27.3 years. In the case of work status, 51.1% (n = 23) of respondents stated that they study and work.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the total sample (n = 45)

Variable	n	Percentage (%)
Gender	-	-
Male	21	46.7
Female	24	53.3
Age	-	-
18-24	25	55.6
25-34	13	28.9
35-44	3	6.7
45-54	2	4.4
55-64	2	4.4
65+	0	0
Work Status	-	-
I am studying	6	13.3
I study and work	14	31.1
Full-time work	23	51.1
Part-time work	0	0
Unemployed	1	2.2
Other	1	2.2
Total	45	100%

The results related to the respondents' previous experiences, their past habits and preferences when choosing a restaurant (Table 2) show that 42.2% (n = 19) of the respondents visit restaurants several times a month. This trend indicates that restaurants have a regular but not daily flow of frequent guests. As the most important factors when choosing a restaurant, 92.2% (n = 42) of the respondents answered that the dominant factor is the quality of the food, and also a significant factor for 57.8% (n = 26) of the respondents is the price. Social networks are the most effective marketing channel for a restaurant, which shows the ubiquitous role of digital marketing, with 71.1% of respondents answering that social networks are the marketing channel that influences the choice of a restaurant. Word of mouth recommendation is also very influential 66.7% (n = 30). The combination of social networks and word of mouth recommendations can significantly influence the decision of the respondents. The vast majority of respondents (n = 36, 80%) believe that online reviews are an important factor, but they are not the only criterion in making a decision to visit a restaurant. In addition, 60% of respondents are open to thematic evenings, but only if the offer sounds interesting. Every second respondent believes that restaurants partially follow feedback, but are not completely convinced that they always use it to improve service.

Table 2. Results of the survey of the College of Hotel Management students from Belgrade

Question	Frequency (%)	n
How often do you visit restaurants?	-	-
Daily	11.1	5
2 - 3 per week	15.6	7
Several times a month	42.2	19
Occasionally (less than once a month)	31.1	14
What is the most important factor for you when choosing a restaurant?	-	-
Food quality	93.3	42
Price	57.8	26
Location	31.1	14
Restaurant ambience	46.7	21
Promotions and discounts	2.2	1
Recommendation of a friend or family	2.89	13
Reviews on the Internet	13.3	6
Sometimes specific actions or offers (Happy hour, thematic evenings, special menus)	15.6	7
Which marketing channel most often influences your decision to visit a restaurant?	-	-
Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)	71.1	32
Online reviews (Tripadvisor, Google Reviews)	22.2	10
Advertisements (TV, radio, billboards)	4.4	2
Oral recommendation	66.7	30
Email marketing / newsletter	0	0
Would you trust a restaurant that has positive reviews online?	-	-
Yes, that is a key factor in my decision	13.3	6
Partially, but I don't believe only in reviews of the	80	36
No, reviews are not important to me	6.7	3
What would motivate you to become a loyal restaurant guest?	-	-
Frequent discounts or promotions	24.4	11
Loyalty program with rewards	20	9
Regular innovations in the menu	24.4	11
Recommendations of friends or famil	31.1	14

How often do you use online food delivery platforms (such as Glovo, Wolt, Mister D) to order from restaurants?	-	-
Daily	2.2	1
2 - 3 per week	4.4	2
Several times a month	26.7	12
Only on special occasions	35.6	16
Never	31.1	14
Would you visit a restaurant that organizes theme nights or special events (eg wine dinners, concerts)?	-	-
Yes, regularly	26.7	12
Sometimes, if the thematic offer is interesting	60	27
No, I'm not interested in that	13.3	6
In general, do you think restaurants actively monitor feedback and use it to improve service?	-	-
Yes, to a great exten	15.6	7
Partially	53.3	24
Very little	28.9	13
Not at all	2.2	1
Total	100%	45

Analyzing the importance of certain factors for choosing a restaurant (Table 3), the average score for the importance of reviews when choosing a restaurant is 3.31, which means that restaurant guests consider reviews moderately important when making a decision to visit a restaurant. The attitude about the importance of loyalty programs also has an average score of 3.31. The attitude about the importance of the restaurant's presence on food delivery platforms has an average score of 3.00, which leads to the conclusion that respondents consider food delivery platforms less important compared to the attitudes about the importance of reviews and loyalty programs. The attitude about the importance of the presence of thematic restaurants has an average score of 3.47, which shows that respondents consider thematic restaurants somewhat more important than reviews, loyalty programs and food delivery platforms.

The correlation between attitudes about the importance of loyalty programs and the importance of reviews is 0.466, which shows that there is a moderate positive correlation between the importances of these two attitudes. Respondents who value reviews also tend to value loyalty programs. Although the correlation is not strong, there is still a positive connection between these two attitudes. The correlation of 0.079 indicates that there is almost no correlation between the attitudes about the importance of reviews and the importance about the presence of restaurants on food delivery platforms and these two attitudes are not mutually related. The importance of reviews and thematic restaurants has a weak positive correlation (0.197). A weak positive correlation (0.198) was established between the variables importance of loyalty programs and the importance of restaurants' presence on food delivery platforms. Also, a weak positive correlation (0.233) indicates that there is a weak connection between attitudes about the importance of loyalty programs and the importance of thematic restaurants. The correlation coefficient of 0.137 indicates that there is no connection between the importance of the presence of restaurants on food delivery platforms and the importance of thematic restaurants.

Table 3. Correlation coefficients among attitudes about the importance of marketing factors

Attitudes	Mean (SD)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Importance of reviews	3.31 (0.97)	1.00	0,466	0,079	0,197
(2) The importance of loyalty programs	3.31 (1.08)	0,466	1.00	0,198	0,233
(3) Importance of food delivery platforms	3.00 (1.48)	0,079	0,198	1.00	0,137

(4) Importance of thematic restaurants	3.47 (1.12)	0,197	0,233	0,137	1.00
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Note: Mean = average score, SD = standard deviation.

A strong negative relationship (-0.97) was found between marketing channels and age groups. This means that as people get older, the use of social networks in marketing activities decreases. In other words, younger people are likely to use social networks more often, while older age groups are less inclined to interact with them. The correlation coefficient of word of mouth and age group is -0.80, also indicating a negative relationship, but it is somewhat weaker compared to the previous case. It is evident that with increasing age, people are less likely to be influenced by word of mouth. Word of mouth is likely to have more influence among younger generations, while older groups may trust traditional forms of marketing more or rely on other sources of information.

Based on obtained results hypothesis 1, 2 and 4 was confirmed, while hypothesis 3 and 5 are rejected.

In conclusion, reviews and loyalty programs are the most related, while other factors, such as delivery platforms and thematic restaurants, are less related to other aspects. Food quality and social media presence are considered key to attracting and retaining visitors. Respondents generally believe in word of mouth recommendations and online reviews, but do not consider these factors to be the only factors that influence their decisions about going to a restaurant. Theme nights can have an attractive effect, but only if they are relevant and interesting for visitors. Also, there is room for improvement in the area of monitoring and responding to customer feedback. Restaurants can use these insights to improve their offerings, marketing strategies, and customer relationships. Younger age groups are more likely to use social media and rely on word of mouth recommendations, while older age groups are less likely to respond to these marketing channels. These correlations highlight the importance of adapting marketing strategies to different age groups, given that different channels, such as social networks and word of mouth, have different impacts depending on the demographic structure of the target group.

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