



ED BURCHER

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Bring a Coffee Program to Life

It is hard for me to imagine that I have been in the foodservice business for more than 40 years. My first jobs were in restaurants during summers and weekends. These restaurants—true mom-and-pop places—were always operated by the owner and his family. It was up to them to do everything, including design, décor, advertising and menu planning. I even remember putting fliers on car windshields during slow times. It was early guerrilla marketing.

So what does this have to do with coffee? Well, back then there was this new restaurant, McDonald's. For me, it was the first recognizable chain. The "Golden Arches" stood for burgers, fries and Coke, and the home of the 15-cent hamburger.

And over the past 10 years, they have done a good—no, a great—job of reinventing themselves. The McCafé business has put a dent in everyone's coffee sales. And it has opened up opportunities in the beverage business by introducing specialty drinks to a new group of customers.

I believe we can learn from both large and small companies and change how we approach our coffee business. With a better product, better experience and better positioning, you can attract people to your offer. I have heard some say they can't compete with coffee today, and I think they are giving up too early.

A place to start is QVC, which stands for quality, value and credibility (not that shopping channel). All of these come together to build a shopping experience for your guest. It is not enough to have just a great product. We need to "package" it and bring it to life in the store.

Focus on Quality

Face it: The specialty coffeehouses and quick-service restaurants have educated the consumer about coffee. Colombian used to stand for quality, but now our guests are now familiar with Arabica and areas of the world that have not only exotic names but also great-tasting coffee.

Start by knowing your target audience and their expectations of coffee. Should



your blend be a light to moderate roast or a darker, bold roast? Do they expect a choice, or will one signature blend suffice?

Conduct some form of consumer panels or benchmarking to understand your stores' need. Your coffee roaster can be a good place to start. And keep the information current as you add new products.

Are you monitoring the quality of your products, not only in the store but also from sourcing and roasting to brewing and holding? Having a quality-assurance process can go a long way toward building consistency.

Guests Seek Value

This means more than lower prices. Think about what you can do with value that satisfies guests' needs where your competition can't. One of our industry's advantages is our flexibility in adding or

trying items quickly. Can you tailor the blend to your market based on feedback or research? At Petro-Canada, we had stores from coast to coast; tastes varied in each province. For drip coffee, the blends went from light roast on the East coast to dark on the West, almost like a scale!

There were also regional differences in flavors, with one preferring hazelnut and another French vanilla. Our approach allowed us to have regional favorites along with a signature blend to compete with the coffee chains. But be careful: You must strike a balance between having choices and adding too much, which can lead to confusion and increased waste.

Cement Your Credibility

And this is where I believe we have the greatest opportunity. Consumers should have their purchase decisions reinforced by the environment, and this is done through what they see, smell and interact with. It is also the service they get when they buy their coffee. The new McCafé certainly says that the company is in the coffee business.

Having several airpots in a black wire rack, on a barren counter against white glossy tile, does not scream "coffee expert." The entire area, from the brewers to the surrounding colors, can reinforce your message. All the visual cues in merchandising and equipment build that experience. What environment can you create to put forth a credible experience and build sales?

We can learn from the chains both big and small—and how one chain in particular shifted its focus, and reputation, from burgers and fries to be a credible, formidable coffee competitor. ■