

SERG RESTAURANTS IN HILTON HEAD SHOWCASE INNOVATION WITH DIVERSE DINING CONCEPTS

Maintaining a loyal, dedicated customer base is crucial to a food service operation's success. Not only does it increase overall profits and ROI, but it promotes conviviality and can lead to meaningful relationships within a community between an operator and its customer base. While there is a myriad of ways an operator can encourage customer loyalty, one of the most important is exceeding expectations, time and time again.

For generations that goal has been accomplished by creating a winning concept and then replicating that brand in multiple locations. The idea being that there would be an economy of scale across several aspects from the design of the dining area to the equipment package for the kitchen.

In 1971, Richard Melman and Jerry Orzoff are created as the first to own and license a variety of restaurant concepts, today owning, licensing or managing 115 establishments as Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc.

But in 2024, a new generation of

visionary operators are leading the charge to create an entity dubbed "MCRCs", Multi-Concept Restaurant Company. Tony Treadway, founder of Tennessee based Creative Energy, a foodservice agency helping food manufacturer target and land MCRCs as well as regional chains, says MCRCs are ideal targets where a single contact can grow sales significantly across multiple concepts within a single metro market.

These operations have turned the traditional chain model on its head. They in fact take real estate opportunities in local marketplaces across the nation that may be next to each other or in the very same neighborhoods and create totally different concepts

and brands.

One of the nation's most successful MCRCs is operating in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, The SERG Restaurant Group has been striving to exceed its customers' expectations since 1984, with a recipe for success based on fostering a community-driven atmosphere. Its desire to create an unforgettable customer experience is what keeps both locals and seasonal tourists coming back each year.

With an approximate 2.5 million tourists each year, Hilton Head Island has no shortage of restaurants to appeal to the masses, and this fact is exactly what motivates SERG to stand out in the crowd. "Our guests have a high expectation of what sort of food,

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service, and atmosphere they will encounter," said Alan Wolf, the CEO and President of SERG Restaurant Group. "So we have to both meet and exceed those expectations by providing coastal hospitality that makes a visit to one of our restaurants stand out from the other choices diners have."

The first SERG concept to launch in 1984 was Giuseppe's Pizza and Pasta by founder Steve Carb. Since then, the group has opened restaurants ranging from southern comfort to BBQ, to seafood and steak. "Having multiple concepts in one market allowed us to apply similar service and operational standards across the different concepts and offer visitors to Hilton Head a variety of choices for their week of vacation, all with the SERG quality seal of approval," said Wolf. These high expectations for hospitality, along with their wide range of offerings, assist in establishing a loyal customer base.

Wolf explained that the SERG logo that is present at each restaurant may comfort guests already familiar with other SERG restaurants. "And it has led to cross-pollination of our guests across the various concepts," he continued, highlighting a key feature of SERG Restaurant Group, and one that has brought them success over the decades.



continued on page 109

In addition to the in-person cross-pollination, SERG has also used technology to communicate with their customers. They have established a comprehensive database through an email program and via social media. However, Wolf explained that SERG uses technology primarily for communication rather than loyalty. “We’ve worked with loyalty tech platforms but found the third-party tie-ins to our POS systems difficult to maintain and often challenging for our guests to interact with,” he said, highlighting that loyalty tends to come out of face-to-face interactions.

The economy of scale to support the full lineup of SERG restaurants also includes Wolf and his team’s approach to purchasing. “With our 15 food service operations from restaurants to catering companies, we were able to negotiate a program with US Foods that enables us to maximize our buying power,” Wolf noted.

During Covid-19, they found some

of their best success in cultivating loyalty. SERG’s Community Strong program allowed guests to buy a 1-year discount card for \$300 and receive a \$100 gift card and a 25% discount on food throughout the year. \$100 of each sale went directly to local charities, and \$100 went to supporting SERG’s team member benefits. “This program united our most loyal guests to our team members in a valuable way,” Wolf explained. “And it is a great way to recognize our local guests when they dine with us.”

SERG has also built up a retail side of their brand, both to recognize guests and to promote loyalty among them. They have a range of hats, t-shirts, and other apparel corresponding to their restaurants. “We’ve always gotten a kick out of seeing our restaurant t-shirts on someone in another city or at the airport,” Wolf said. “It provides a great marketing reach for our brands.”

Another important initiative SERG

takes is responding to customer feedback, which shows guests that the people behind the business value them. Wolf explained that they focus on winning guests back every time a complaint arises, and that they are constantly seeking feedback in order to grow. “And when we get positive feedback, we celebrate it with our staff and recognize team members through our rewards platform for their great review,” Wolf said. The virtual SERG Team Rewards program recognizes team members’ hard work, providing them points to redeem for gadgets, retail, tickets, and hotel stays.

Besides these initiatives, the Hilton Head eateries each provide different opportunities for community and loyalty building. Live music, for instance, is standard at more than half of SERG’s restaurants. Their waterfront Poseidon restaurant, which offers seafood, steak, and raw bar, has a rooftop bar serving as a full-on entertainment venue. “It’s been a great way

to bring large name brands and DJs to the market to provide a unique nightlife experience for locals and visitors,” Wolf said.

Going forward, Wolf explained that SERG hopes to continue growing both in and outside of Hilton Head Island, as having their restaurants within driving distance is extremely beneficial from an executive standpoint. “We see additional growth opportunities right here in our market and into Beaufort and Hardeeville,” he said. With the on-going addition of locations, as SERG Restaurant Group continues build out its community base of concepts and brands the company is reinventing the blueprint of successful dining operations for the nation’s restaurant operators.

For more information on the Serg Restaurant Group, visit their website at <https://sergroup.com/>