

by Michael Rosman

A baker's dozen

13 answers to 13 frequently asked questions about your catering operation

As a catering coach/consultant, I'm asked lots of questions. This month, we are going to throw the traditional content article format out the window in favor of a question/answer format. Let me know what you think!



Question 1 We've built our reputation as a full-service caterer. We want to break into the corporate drop-off market. While our corporate business is starting to grow, we are anxious for it to grow faster. Any suggestions?

Answer You're expanding your brand, which means you want to shift consumer perception. Create a separate, corporate drop-off menu and link it on your website. Promote this new division of your business through social media and email marketing. Offer complimentary tastings to businesses in your area that order catering regularly. Host an open house. Invite the people who order catering to sample your corporate menu. Have your staff present to answer questions and engage your prospects. Remember, you are starting a new business within your business. It will take commitment, persistence, and patience.

Question 2 Should I give my corporate drop-off division a separate name?

Answer There is no right or wrong answer. Some clients add, "Express" or "Delivery" or "Corporate Catering" after the name (example: Emma's Catering: Express). Others will reference their "Corporate Catering Division." If you decide on a separate name, consider a separate phone number as well.

Question 3 Can you suggest a creative, affordable marketing idea?

Answer Put your company name/logo and phone number/website on the roof of your delivery vehicle(s) as well as the sides. Anyone looking through an office window to the street below will see your company information.

Question 4 When is an order big enough that two people are required for delivery and set up?

Answer It depends. You could have an order for 200 people, but if it's only coffee and desserts, one person should be able to handle it. Lunch for 200 people is a different story.

Considerations include:

- How much set-up time does your delivery person have available?
- Are you delivering hot food or box lunches?
- Are cans/bottles of beverages included? (This adds time to set up.)
- What is the "ease of delivery factor" to the specific company?

With larger orders, I suggest being safe rather than sorry. (I've travelled the "Sorry Road"—it's not fun.) If you're on the fence, send a second person. Sometimes we have two people go together and get everything unloaded and into the company. One stays and sets up, while the other makes other drop-offs in the area—and then circles back to pick-up their partner, or helps finish setting up, if necessary.

Question 5 Do you always set up the order? Do you ever just drop it off at reception?

Answer We always offer to set up. For some clients, it's an important component of our service. I'm constantly reminding our delivery representatives, "You are the faces of this business. Your job is to make each customer feel as if they are the most important customer of your day."

Question 6 When someone without a corporate account wants to place their first order, and asks to be billed, will you do that?

Answer No. We politely explain the first order is required to go on a credit card (we retain the information). Then, we email them a link to the Account Application Form on our website. We tell them that once the form is completed, we can bill them for all future orders.

Question 7 How do you handle an end-of-the day call from a customer requesting a labor-intensive hot meal, such as lasagna for 40 people for the next day? Especially when the kitchen crew is gone for the day?

Answer When the kitchen is producing lasagna, always make extra and freeze them. The person who takes the order can pull them from the freezer so they will thaw by the next day. (Note: You can do this with other popular, freezable entrees as well.)

Question 8 How do I handle requests for same day orders?

Answer Embrace them. As your

business grows, calls for same-day orders will increase. With your chef, establish which production-friendly, same-day menu items you can offer. If you are booked solid for noon deliveries, tell your customer you can deliver by 12:30 p.m. If you are serious about becoming a player in your corporate catering market, you must be able to accommodate same day orders to the best of your capabilities.

Question 9 How much should I charge for delivery?

Answer Check out what your competitors are charging for delivery and stay within that range. If you're providing quality, on time delivery, err on the higher side of the range. Delivery/service charges are bottom line revenue that adds up quickly.

Question 10 We have had the same catering menu for years. Should we change it up periodically?

Answer Absolutely yes. Especially when you have created repeat business. This process does not have to be as time consuming as you may think. When I review a coaching/consulting client's menu, it often has more entrees, sandwiches, sides, and salads than are necessary. A big menu can be overwhelming for some potential customers. For example, if you have 10 chicken entrees, remove four. In six months, put them back on the menu and remove four others. Do the same for sandwiches, sides, and salads. Another tip is to feature one or two as "Seasonal Specials" and rotate those four times a year. This works—trust me.

Question 11 When setting up hot food in chafers, sometimes we're running around a customer's office looking for a kitchen or bathroom for water. Making multiple trips back and forth draws some inquiring looks and feels unprofessional. Any thoughts?

Answer Bring hot water with you. Fill air pots or Cambros from the hot water dispenser on your coffee machine.

Question 12 We are easily able to track sales for our three divisions: 1) Corporate drop-off catering, 2) Full-service catering, and 3) Restaurant/café. Separating expenses has been much more difficult. How do you suggest allocating expenses to our different divisions?

Answer This is challenging. We have tried different methodologies and concluded it will never be perfect. Some expenses such as labor, paper products, and china rentals are easier to categorize. Food costs are trickier. When a \$400 produce order comes in and three different departments are grabbing from it, determining how to allocate the costs can make your head spin. Create a system that is as accurate as possible, and within reason. At minimum, always be aware of the financial health of your operation as a whole.

Question 13 I can't afford a sales person and have no one to make cold calls. How do I get lists of businesses in my area that order catering?

Answer Call The Corporate Caterer at 781-641-3303 and ask about The Leads Program. You give them the zip codes regarding where you want to pursue new corporate catering business and they do all the cold calling for you. This will save you an enormous amount of time. 



Michael Rosman is part of the Catersource Consulting Unit (CCU). His membership website, TheCorporateCaterer.com and Custom Leads Program are the go-to resources for operators who want to begin or grow a corporate drop-off catering division. Michael can be reached at michael@thecorporatecaterer.com.