

Making the Sale

Once you get a customer in the door, how do you convert the sale? Here, several successful gourmet businesses reveal how they boost their bottom lines.

By Anna Wolfe

This story could be summed up in three words: sample, sample, sample. While gourmet retailers from coast to coast know that sampling is key to driving sales, there are finer points worth exploring.

The One-Two Punch

Daily samplings and weekly tastings always are on the calendar at The Gourmet Gallery, a 10-year-old gourmet store with two locations in Edmond and Oklahoma City, Okla. Owners Janet McDonald and Cindy Utecht, who have tried every item on the shelves, create recipes using the stores' products. The recipes are simple: Each starts with a jarred product and has just four or five steps.

"People want to cook; they are looking for easy," McDonald says.



Janet McDonald, left, and Cindy Utecht, owners of The Gourmet Gallery, create recipes using their stores' products. Their Saturday tasting events bring in repeat customers.



Near the entrance, The Gourmet Gallery showcases seasonal-themed displays featuring the products plus free recipe cards.

Every day, products are being sampled. And on Saturdays, a themed, in-store tasting event showcases the duo's tasty-yet-simple recipes alongside a featured specialty food product, which is 20 percent off. The in-store tastings, which McDonald describes as The Gourmet Gallery's take on a cooking class, are promoted in local newspapers, on the store's online calendar and with a sign at the entrance. Recent in-store events included Easter dinner, a Royal Wedding Celebration that focused on all things British and Cinco de Mayo.

Be Prepared

Even though The Gourmet Gallery's events take place a week or two before a holiday, Utecht and McDonald have customers who come in the day before — or hours before — an event they're hosting, needing recipes and other advice for home entertaining.

"We can do that" is always the answer, notes Utecht, who adds that easy appetizer ideas constantly are in ▶

demand. Having a can-do attitude and boxes of recipe cards at the ready helps The Gourmet Gallery team to service customers and sell products.

Last August, the retailer doubled the size of its Edmond store when it relocated to a 2,000-square-foot standalone destination at the Northpark Mall from an inside-the-mall location.

"We knew we needed a bigger store," McDonald says. "It was so crowded you couldn't even turn around at the tastings." Now, customers can park near the store's entrance, and regulars frequent tastings.

"We're on their Saturday list of things to do," Utecht says. "They want to see what we're sampling."

At Gypsy Kitchen in Quincy, Mass., Owner Lisa Lammé also conducts samplings every day at her



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– Lisa Lammé,
owner, Gypsy Kitchen

gourmet wine and cheese store. She recently wrote The Gypsy Kitchen cookbook, which is full of recipes she uses at the store, including the one for her signature hot sauce that is available wholesale.

"Having tastings and sharing recipes is important," Lammé says. "Most people have no idea how to use it or how to cook with it once they get it home."

Time Is Money

Sampling recipes made with featured products is a winning strategy, agrees Nancy Wekselbaum, founder of The Gracious Gourmet, a gourmet condiment company based in Bridgewater, Conn.

Many specialty food companies, including The Gracious Gourmet, run recipes on their websites. And with the cost of food increasing, emphasizing the time-saving ability of gourmet products can help drive sales, notes Wekselbaum, who does a demo where she uses The Gracious Gourmet's condiments to whip up eight dishes in an hour.

Above all, it is the quality that drives gourmet product sales, Wekselbaum says.

"I believe people want quality, and I believe it's is a huge movement that's gaining ..." she notes. "Consumers today are keen are looking at ingredients, nutritional values of product, and asking themselves, 'Is this something I want to put into my body?'"

Driving In-Store Traffic

Getting customers in the door is a task in itself. Here are a few tried-and-true traffic builders.

In-Store Events

Janet McDonald and Cindy Utecht of The Gourmet Gallery in Oklahoma City and Edmond, Okla., plan in-store tastings every week.

In addition to advertising in local newspapers, the duo has cultivated relationships with local food writers and editors who include The Gourmet Gallery's events in their publications' calendar of events.

"Getting people here is key," McDonald says. "Once they're in the store, they're going to buy."

Use Your Windows

Engage passersby and customers by creating enticing front windows. Get creative. For retailers that have a sizeable window, retail marketing consultant Laurel Tielis suggests serving an elegant sit-down dinner.

"I always have funky things in the windows," says Lisa Lammé, owner of Gypsy Kitchen, in Quincy, Mass. "You have to create mystery about you and your business."

Do Good

A retailer can increase its public relations outreach "exponentially" by partnering with a charity, which often has strong public relations clout with local media and its supporters, Tielis notes. For example, the retailer could donate an event's profits to a charity.

"Some things work, some things don't, but you have to give back," Lammé says.

Active vs. Passive

In-store sampling is essential to selling gourmet products. Active demos, while effective, can take several hours and may not be feasible for all retailers.

“Constant passive demoing, especially in smaller stores where people can answer questions, is very important,” Wekselbaum says.

Along the same lines, don’t forget in-store signage — “the silent salesperson,” she notes.

For example, use shelf talkers to draw attention to a product. Wekselbaum lists five or so suggested uses, which are featured on The Gracious Gourmet’s label, to create shelf talkers for products such as the Sour Cherry Spread that recently received a silver soft award from the National Association of the Specialty Food Trade.

Know Your Customer

Signage and presentation are essential to grabbing the customer’s attention, continues Vanessa Ting, founder of Retail Path, a Los Angeles-based retail strategy consultancy.

Targeted assortments, grouped by brand or by category, can attract shoppers.

“On a more tactical level, you can pull together end-cap programs that get people to stop,” says Ting, who used to work for discount retailer Target. “The next challenge is getting them down the aisles.”



◀ **Nancy Wekselbaum, who launched The Gracious Gourmet condiment line four years ago, says social media and other public relations tactics have contributed to her growing company’s success.**

Understanding your customers’ needs and picking the right products is where some retailers miss the mark.

“The key is to understand the shopper, his or her needs attitudes and behaviors,” Ting says. “Your money-maker is having the products that he or she needs — and then expanding customer basket size to drives sales.”

Not One Size Fits All

To help its stores’ team of culinary professionals connect with The Chopping Block’s customers’ needs, the gourmet retailer started a buying group earlier this year. Every two weeks, the culinary team — sous chefs, lead teachers and class assistants — meet to discuss the stores’ products.

“We wanted to educate the culinary team and help ▶

Integrity Selling

The staff at the two Chopping Block stores in Chicago sell based on integrity. Buyer Liz Songer says the culinary team is trained on why each product has been selected for the store. Each category has a good, better and best option, and the staff is trained on different product features so that they can engage each customer in what they’re looking for and help them make an educated buying decision on what’s best for his or her skill level and budget.

Newsletters & Social Media

It takes more than planning an event. Use social media tools to connect with customers and make them aware of what’s going on with the store. It is simple and affordable to use social media to drive store traffic. Tools such as Twitter and Facebook are ideal for promoting in-store events and new products.

The Gracious Gourmet’s founder, Nancy Wekselbaum, admits she regularly uses these tools to connect with fans.

“I have worked and made a conscious decision to build a presence on Facebook and Twitter, and it has drawn people to me,” she says.

Presentation

A store’s presentation and organization is paramount, stresses Vanessa Ting, founder of Retail Path, a Los Angeles-based retail strategy consultancy. Retailers should make sure their stores are clean, well-organized and stocked.

It’s about making the shopping experience enjoyable and “how long can you capture the person in the store,” Ting says. “The longer they’re in the store, the more money they spend.”



▲
Laurel Tielis' book offers up affordable store promotion ideas.

them understand why we carry the retail assortment that we do," explains Liz Songer, buyer for the Chicago-based gourmet retailer. "We want them to understand why it has a place on the shelf."

The Chopping Block's mission is to teach people how to cook, explains Songer. Each month at its Merchandise Mart and Lincoln Square locations, the retailer offers about 250 cooking classes — everything from basic knife skills and children's classes to intensive Cupcake Bootcamps. The stores feature a highly selective product selection — everything from knives and gadgets to cookware

and condiments. And instead of providing dozens of options, they showcase good, better and best options.

Product knowledge and insight into the buying process help The Chopping Block's team of culinary experts make the appropriate buying recommendations to the customer based on the customer's skill level and budget.

For example, the stores carry Rösle garlic press, a staple in many professional kitchens, as well as the Chef'n Garlic Zoom, a wheeled gadget that slices garlic when it is rolled.

"We want them to understand why a Garlic Zoom is an essential tool in some kitchens," Songer says.

Matching up customers with the appropriate tools is crucial to boosting their confidence in the kitchen, keeping them cooking, and building their trust in The Chopping Block and its staff.

Removing the Obstacles

Robert Navarino, owner of The Chef's Shop, a kitchenware store in Great Barrington, Mass., says more

is needed to win over today's price-sensitive shoppers.

In addition to the stellar service of his knowledgeable staff and pleasant shopping environment — every customer is greeted and asked if they'd like an espresso or tea — Navarino keeps his products at the minimum advertised price and offers to meet other retailers' prices. Plus, the store extends a product's warranty one year beyond the manufacturer's. With all that, why would gourmet cooks shop anywhere else?

Making Connections

Whether it is a cooking class or an in-store tasting, another key to organizing successful in-store events is to make them fun, social experiences, explains Laurel Tielis, a retail consultant located in San Francisco.

In her book, "Ka-Ching! How to Ring Up More Sales," Tielis shares ideas she gathered from independent retailers. The 99-page publication is not a textbook; rather, it is a reference with many affordable and easy-to-do ideas, she explains.

In-store events are great for driving sales. Tielis suggests that retailers do paired tastings such as chocolate and wine; if a retailer doesn't sell wine, it could team up with one that does for an in-store event and cross-promotion.

Work Against The Clock

To attract new customers, Tielis suggests that retailers try changing their hours. One day a month, open early or stay open later than usual.

"You'll get a whole new population to come into your store," Tielis says. "Think of it as a recurring party, such as a First Friday event, with samplings and beverages."

Contests are another way to connect with customers and increase sales. Invite customers, Facebook fans and friends to contribute their best recipes for a food product or most innovative use of an item of kitchenware, Tielis suggests. To enter, customers should fill out or drop off an application at the store. The best could be videotaped and shared on YouTube as well as the store's website. Viewers could choose the winner, so the contest could go viral, Tielis notes.

Whether it is during regular business hours or at a special, off-hour event, it is important to "create a culture of engagement with your customers," Tielis asserts. "Make it (coming to your store to shop) fun for them."

To keep existing customers engaged and attract new ones, get creative, think out of the box, and try new promos and contests, suggests Gypsy Kitchen's Lammé.

With 23-years of gourmet retail experience, Lammé sums up her not-so-secret sales strategy as "listening, knowing their names and getting them what they want." **TGR**



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– Laurel Tielis, retail consultant/author, "Ka-Ching! How to Ring Up More Sales"

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