Catering To Kids

They’re little now . . . but watch them grow! Kids are important as a market today, and even more important as the market of tomorrow. And sharp operators are catering to them with creativity, craziness, and a pinch of panache.

By Linda Packer

Forty-three years ago this past summer, when Bob Wian was developing a double-deck hamburger for his brand-new Big Boy restaurant, he decided that to make it a “family place” would mean providing good food and comfort for all ages. Specifically, he wanted to make Bob’s Big Boy relaxed and enjoyable enough for parents to want to bring their youngsters.

So he made high chairs and booster chairs available at all times. He gave out colored bibs and free baby food. He instituted a monthly comic book called The Adventures of Big Boy, a neighborhood doggo who not only taught readers about right and wrong and gave them educational games to play, but also, in his spare time, went to the moon.

In the 43 years since, the chain — now more than 1,050 units through both company-owned stores and the stores of 19 franchise companies — has changed its focus. Instead of appealing to the parents to bring in their kids, they now appeal to the kids to bring in their parents. In addition to the booster chairs and free baby food, they’ve also instituted placemats for children to color (given out with two or three washable crayons and parental permission); hand puppets and balloons at store openings; children’s menus with games on the back; punch cards which, after 10 punches, result in free gifts for children; and an on-going Big Boy Birthday Club.

“We go for a climate of doing more than just promotions,” said Roy Raskin, Big Boy’s vice president of franchise operations. “And the reports we’ve had from units that have been doing these things have been excellent. The managers feel the kids those things attract are of an age that influences their parents. And we want you very much to please the kids . . . to the satisfaction of their parents.”

Pleasing children to the satisfaction of their parents is not a new idea, but it’s one that’s gaining momentum. The children’s market is a strong one today, and the reasons for that are threefold.

First, children are being taken out to eat more often because, as a whole, families are eating out more often. With an increase in the number of two-career households (see “Women”, FSM June 1979), there is less time to spend together as a family, less time to cook, and more disposable income. People are going out to eat as family units, and in order to keep their trade restaurants are going to have to start appealing to the littlest members of the group.

Secondly, children themselves are wealthier today than ever before. The reasons for that, psychologists say, range from an absent parent’s appeasement of guilt to an earlier tapping of the Good Old American Work Ethic: Children of eight and nine are now mowing more lawns and washing more cars and sitting with more babies. Even in recessionary times, a lot of kids are prospering.

And lastly, it looks as though a great many restaurants are popping up with long-term game plans. The decade of instability for chains — Minnie who’s Fried Chicken? — is past, and independents are concentrating on solidifying their markets. And those who have been

continued
around for several years are discovering that the people who were children when they opened have a habit of becoming adults before they close. And those operations see a delight in growing old together.

The Ground Round has been around for ten years," said Thomas Russo, group vice president of specialty restaurants for the Ground Round's parent company, Howard Johnson. "And ten years ago, an 18-year-old was eight. We want that person to grow up with us. We think that with what we have to offer, he or she can.

What the Ground Round has to offer is peanuts and popcorn and, in lieu of Cracker Jack, old movies and silent cartoons shown on giant screens, free vending machines that click out toys, Bingo the Clown and his magic tricks, a scale that weighs children for "penny-a-pound" promotions, hot dog stands served in plastic take-home baseball caps, a child's menu incorporated onto the regular menu so that the child doesn't feel segregated, and food for every age ... at the tune of a 45.70 check average per adult or $1.75 per child. The company strives for is to have these things thought of not as separate promotions, but as part of a package that caters, successfully, to all age groups. "The Ground Round has the ability to appeal to different segments of the population - before a child, and then into all the same rooms," Russo said.

And one way in which they do that is to think of children as a market entirely separate from and entirely equal to their parents. "We try to satisfy them all the things that we satisfy in adults - the needs for food, ambiance, quality and entertainment," said Russo. "We think, what do they like to eat? Chicken, hamburgers, fish - we put them on the menu. They like ice cream sundaes they're the things that children love. They love energy and like to move around - we encourage them to go to the barrels and scoop their own baskets of peanuts. This is not a rigid restaurant. It's relaxed for both children and adults.

The atmosphere may be relaxed; the expansion plan is not, at least not compared to several years ago. The last three years have brought an accelerated clip to the program. Currently the Ground Round chain is over 150 units wide, having opened four this past July and an additional seven in August. The food served is fun - food fat hamburgers and barbecued beef on buns, corned beef and roast beef sandwiches, chili, add-ons like French-fried mushrooms, pitchers of drinks. The free peanuts are digested by the basketful, their shells tossed on the floor. The children's menu consists of set food at set prices: fried chicken, hamburger, frankfurter or fish with French fries and beverage for $1.79.

With and the items boxed right in the regular menu, a child feels the delights of eating in. "I think it's terrible when you as

affordable food that is classic kid fare - burgers and fries, with a side order of peanuts and popcorn to those kids who have some money to spend. Most children will have fast-food chains appeal more directly to the children with give-aways, fast service, and

The Ground Round restaurant chain feels one reason that kids are important is, simply, that they'll grow.

The Loose Caboose offers ham-burger-coaliries, with a side order of boxcar verbiage and free engine fanatics. Located at the shopping center in Philadelphia (headquarters are in Cherry Hill, NJ), the company currently has one unit with four others being readied for operation along the Eastern seaboard. The Loose Caboose is a combination convenience food mart and fast-food operation, two cabouses joined by a dining car with 30 seats.

"We have a lot of kids from about eight to about 14 stop in on their own. They'll pick up a hamburger or hot dog before or after school," said Bill Oven, president of the Loose Caboose, adding that their location - a free-standing building in a shopping center in a densely populated residential area - helps to draw the kids. The type of food they serve also helps, and so do the prices - $4.35 for a Box Car Burger, $3.50 for a signature item called "The Teenie Weenie"

"The Teenie Weenie is a nice drawing card," said Nash. "It's about half the size of a regular hot dog and bun. Our cost should be about half, but it's a little higher than that."

They also serve larger hot dogs, fried chicken, Chatanooga Chili, milkshakes, and a special four-ounce fillet of chicken breast.

"Obviously, a lot of that is for the parents," Nash said. "We believe that children bring parents besides coming themselves." Raymond Kovarsky, founder of the Loose Caboose, agrees. "Our prices are lower than any of our competitors," he said, "which should be good news for parents."

Many children seem to be smitten with the railroad bug. Not only do they like the trimmings of the Loose Caboose, but they gravitate toward other similarly decorated operations as well as Victorian "$1.79" with its boxcar seats as well as its salad bar (kids love getting up and creating their own anything!), is popular with the small set. Andy's Diner, a Seatle steak stop with a 30-year track record of pleasing both kids and their parents, consists of seven fit-for-dining railroad cars, including one that FDR used in a presidential campaign. "Kids love the railroad theme," says Al Arkanin, vice president and co-owner of Andy's Diner. And kids are catered to with gentle service, children's menues that fold out to become railroad hats, and replicas of placemats that are actually blow-up plastic pillows. The children's menu, like the Ground Round's, tends to include rather than segregate the children: All of the meat items on it are simply smaller sizes of the same steaks that are served to adults. And like the Ground Round, children's customers tend to show up years later as satisfied adult customers.

But fast-food operations wanting the children's business in particular were seeing the value in, if not railroad themes, fast service and "kid food" and restaurants with a sort of Goodbye, parent-directed advertising; hello, Ronald Mcdonald. Chuck Schoenleib, executive vice president, director of marketing for Burger King, says of the Magical Burger King: "He talks to kids. He was designed to be fun, to tell kids in as fun a way as he can that the food at Burger King is good." Schoenleib feels the main reason kids like Burger King is that they've related the perennial favorites - hamburgers, cola and fries - and that they don't miss desserts at all.

Jan Perez, manager of sales promotions for A & W, disagrees. She feels kids like desserts, and like A & W's root shakes and the availability of root beer floats and specialty desserts. But she

He's soft, he's cuddly, he's appealing to both kids and adults. But don't underestimate the Great Root Bear's marketing potential. He's successfully used in every event from bowling tournaments and parades to unit openings.
Can't have the amount of little kids we have and serve a spicy pizza,' he said. But if variety is the spice of life, Pizza Time is running hot — pizzas are available with ham, pineapple, anchovies and much more. Prices range from $2.79 for an individual cheese pizza to $8.95 for a large, ultra-elaborate Big C's Combo. Landrum says the average ticket for a family of three is $10.

That might be more than for other pizza places, but for a family it's not much,' he said. 'The main thing is that nobody else has what we have — a miniature amusement park. Other pizza parlors have signs saying, 'Leave Children Seated.' We don't. We encourage kids to get up and run around. And parents can sit and drink their beer or coffee, and everybody has a good time,' Landrum and Bushnell also have a good time. Each Pizza Time unit is averaging $1 million a year, with 80 percent coming from food and drink, and 20 percent from games. And with their expansion plans — from 500 to 1,000 units in five years, made possible largely by Selecta's management company (TIM), which plans to develop 285 units in 16 states in five years — they, along with Chuck E. Cheese, will be smiling all the way to the improved Cambert.

Because Pizza Time has the formula — treat the customer as something special, give them things that appeal to their energy-filled minds and bodies, and don't neglect Mom and Dad. It's been the formula for a long time, and will be that way even longer; kids are some of the most predictable beings around. They are small, energetic people coming into their own, and deserve to be handled with care. And while catering to them isn't easy, restaurants that are making the attempt are getting the jump on a market that just might provide some needed stability in the otherwise tumultuous decade.

Sue Thomhart, a woman who works at the Children's Museum in Denver, is responsible for putting together Boing!, a newspaper written by kids, for kids. It includes problem-solving columns, articles, and child-written restaurant reviews. From Thomhart, herself a mother, come these kid-catering tips:

'Kids pay attention to how a place makes them feel — are the seats slippery, hot, too high, too low? They generally reject foods that feel bad' in their mouths. They generally feel queasy about strange foods, and rebel at 'guts meals' like brains, 'wiggly things' like squid, and 'crawly things' like chocolate grasshoppers. But once they get past those reservations, kids can be little gourmets. My son, Fred, loves escargot!' Also, no kid worth his or her salt will willingly enjoy a meal associated with a hassle, even if just a fight over the clothes he or she has to wear to go to dinner.'
CATERING TO KIDS
(Food Service Marketing - October, 1979)

Date of Origin: 1979
 Archived: 12-18-08
 Submission by Jenn W.
 Version 1.0

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