

BUYING

What to buy
and
how to save



intelligence about the market or the management. “I like to talk to the employees and see what’s going on,” says Sam Rothschild, COO of Slim Chickens. “I get menu inspiration, because I’m a culinary guy, from seeing cool stuff like these one-off restaurants.”

Moreover, these casual conversations also reveal what it is staff appreciate (as well as what they don’t) about working at the restaurant and the owners, and could be more candid than the information a leader’s own employees are willing to give.

3. Conduct mini mystery shops.

Anthony Pigliacampo, co-founder and co-CEO of Modern Market, says when visiting his restaurants, he takes advantage of the fact that many team members don’t recognize him. Acting as a secret shopper, he pays attention to what the entire dining experience is like, from the time he steps foot in the restaurant until he finishes eating and introduces himself to staff. Besides gathering honest information, Pigliacampo makes it a practice to address the positives and pitfalls he witnesses immediately.

4. Go off-hours.

While scouting potential locations, Zeb Hastings, VP of franchise development at Quaker Steak & Lube, says he tries to visit a minimum of three to four competitors in the area at different times of day on different days of the week. This provides enough varied statistics to fully understand what the breakfast, lunch, dinner and in-between crowds are like, how weekday sales compare to weekend profits, and how that specific spot’s overall traffic would affect the restaurant’s ability to succeed, he says. —Mandy Ellis

Line Item

TRIPS WORTH TAKING

Four things restaurant execs always do when they travel.

Flight to flight, franchise to franchise—traveling to restaurants within a portfolio to verify proper operations, meet staff and issue feedback can become routine. *Restaurant Business* asked chain restaurant executives what they do every time they step off the plane to make sure these visits are valuable.

1. Treat all meals as reconnaissance.

“I do my homework before I go, find out what’s hot on a local basis and visit restaurants that are part and parcel of what concepts are driving the market,” says Tom Ryan, founder and

CEO of Smashburger. “Using insights into cities or what’s emerging helped me see things off the beaten path that I wouldn’t have seen otherwise.”

Eating all meals at relevant restaurants—including competitors, up-and-coming spots or a compelling local concept—marries research with per diems, and provides a critical window into how to strengthen and adapt a concept for that specific market, Ryan suggests.

2. Don’t just talk to your own employees.

While dining at competitor restaurants, those servers and other staff are a great source of on-the-ground



\$322

Average per diem expenditures for business travel, according to Business Travel News