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Tapping Healthy Impulses Through Text Messages

Quick-service restaurant chain WaBa Grill Teriyaki House launched a mobile text-messaging campaign designed to entice customers at just the moment they are making lunchtime dining decisions.

By Margaret Littman, Contributing Editor -- Chain Leader, 9/1/2009

This scene plays out every day: A group of co-workers stands in the parking lot, hemming and hawing about where they should eat lunch. Someone fires off the name of a restaurant, someone else vetoes it, suggesting another. Imagine if, while standing in this crowd of indecision, someone receives a perfectly timed text message with a special offer at a nearby eatery.

That's the idea behind the latest promotion from **WaBa Grill Teriyaki House**. This summer, the 22-unit quick-service restaurant chain launched a mobile text-messaging campaign designed to entice customers at just the moment they are making their lunchtime dining decisions, suggesting the chain's healthful alternative to typical fast food.

"People have tried teriyaki, but we don't use any oil, and 80 percent of customers return after they test it this way," says Brian Ham, CFO of the Commerce, Calif.-based chain.

The text messages tell customers that if they bring in two friends and show their phone to the cashier, they'll receive a free (healthful) lunch. Because the coupon does not need to be printed to be redeemed, there's no forethought required.

"The time is right before lunchtime, when people are thinking about making a healthy choice at lunch," Ham adds.

WaBa Grill (the name is derived from a Korean word meaning "come in") is trying to get customers to "come in" for its healthful take on teriyaki (no oil, low-fat, -calorie and -carb) foods. The strategy makes sense, says Erin O'Brien, senior director of new media for Austin, Texas-based DMX Inc., the ad agency that worked with WaBa on the campaign. In general, she says, mobile coupons have a redemption rate five times that of paper coupons. WaBa is a small chain, with just one company-owned unit and a small ad budget. It recently began collecting from franchisees for a marketing fund.

There is no code on the text coupons, so customers can forward them to friends who can also redeem them. Adds O'Brien: "They are winning on texts they don't even send out."

MORE:

Tropical Smoothie Cafe and Einstein Bros. Bagels are using their menu boards to tell their nutritional story without overwhelming customers with information.

Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes gave away packets of tomato seeds this summer to emphasize how fresh and unprocessed its ingredients are.

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WaBa Grill Teriyaki House sent text messages designed to appeal to young professionals who eat lunch out five times a week at exactly the time they make their lunchtime decisions.

