

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Exploration Study of High and Low Visitation Food Truck Consumers

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Abstract

The food truck industry has grown rapidly in recent years and there has not little any research investigating the food truck consumer. Specifically, this research split the sample to report differences between consumers with high visitation and consumers with low visitation. This research found that there were two distinct statistically significant differences between those that the groups. The group that visited less is drawn to the experience, wanted to be part of the community, and to expanding on the type of food they usually enjoy. The high visitation group reported being drawn to food trucks because of colleagues, friends and family. Additionally, the second group members are “foodies” seeking gourmet food at a reasonable price. Finally, by segmenting their consumer base, food truck owners can enhance the experience of more visitors in a specific manner.

Keywords: Food Trucks, Loyalty, Experience, Small Business, Guests

1. Introduction

The history of food trucks goes back to 1600’s in New Amsterdam which is now New York City. The push cart did not have the ability to heat or prepare food but it offered food such as meat pies and sandwiches for urban workers that could not travel home for lunch (Butler, 2014). Another reason behind the demand for push carts was given as cramped conditions in cities. Additionally, many did not have resources to make their own food (Mealey, 2019). This occurred in the post-Civil War years when the west was expanding and the pioneers needed to be fed. The direct ancestor of the food truck was the chuck wagon. Chuck wagons followed the cowboys on their trail providing breakfast, lunch, and dinner out of their wagons which were designed with separate areas for pot storage, washing up and food preparation (Butler, 2014). In 1872, the first food truck was opened by Walter Scott. He parked his covered wagon next to a newspaper office in Providence, Rhode Island. He sold sandwiches, pies and coffee to the employees that had little time (Restaurant Engine, 2019). There has been a long history of food trucks from the late

17th century until the creation of the first gourmet food truck in the United States Kogi by Roy Choi in 2008 in Los Angeles (Mealey, 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Growth of Food Trucks

Although food trucks have been around in some form since the 17th century, they grew in popularity in 2008 as a result of the recession. There were many talented chefs that were looking for a way to open a restaurant and this seemed to be the best, most affordable option at the time (Mealey, 2019). Consumers were looking to make the most of their discretionary income by purchasing affordable gourmet food (IBIS World, 2014). Fast forward to the present day where with more than 23,000 food trucks in the United States making about a billion dollars annually (Mealey, 2019). Food trucks are active in more than 300 cities (Hendrix and Bowdish, 2018). Food trucks are also growing at a higher rate than traditional restaurants. The annual growth rate for food trucks is 7.3% compared to a 2% growth rate for traditional restaurants (Johnson, 2019). One of the key reasons for the higher growth

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rate in food trucks is the lower upfront investment outlay required. On average, the initial investment for food trucks is \$55,000 and \$75,000 on average compared to \$250,000-\$500,000 for traditional brick and mortar restaurants (Saxe, 2018). Food trucks also have the ability get go directly to the consumers based on their target market. Further, they have easier access to their market through the rising use of social media (Millbrath, 2018). Another reason food trucks are desirable is along with a lower upfront investment required, food truck customers spend slightly more than fast casual restaurant customers which are typically considered the counterpart of food trucks' (Sundale Research 2022).

Additionally, food trucks allows an owner's creativity to be directly applied and modified often. If a menu item is not popular or profitable, the owner can easily and cost effectively change the menu. An owner is free to change their menu whenever they would like. Due to this extreme flexibility, some traditional restaurants are using food trucks as "test kitchens". Because the food truck consumer is interested in a diversity of food, the operator. has the ability to be more creative. A food truck operator can test menus, concepts, and strategies through their ability to be mobile and make changes easier (FoodTruckOperator.com, 2017, FoodTruckr.com, 2014).

Typically, operator can respond to the customer's needs immediately because they are the line employee as well. In this way, another food truck benefit is that consumers are able to see and converse with the chefs which enhances the overall experience. The interactions allows for pulsed or real time feedback which can help to fine tune the menu and make other noticed adjustments quickly (FoodTruckOperator.com, 2017).

The mobility of the food truck gives the operator the ability to find different venues where they can make the most sales. They are not tied down to one area that may be popular one year and not the next. Catering events, concerts, festivals, and street locations provide a diversity of opportunities (Profitable Venture, 2020).

2.2 Reasons Behind Growth: Consumer Perspective

The growth of the food truck industry has paralleled societies interest in unique food offerings offered in a casual setting at a reasonable price (Sundale Research, 2022). There is an increase in demand for convenient meals that are speedier than the traditional brick and mortar options. People that frequent food trucks like to dine at food trucks because of the overall

experience, they are seeking something new, different and convenient (Milbrath, 2018 and Shin et al., 2019)

The "foodie" movement helped by social media and television sensation food channel entertainment, creating the interest in more authentic experiences involving adventurous food that could be found in food trucks (Linnekin et al., 2011). Their interest in food that is within their budget provides excitement during the experience that is fashionable (Aquad et al., 2019; Burt et al., 2000).

Another part of the food truck appeal is that people are given a chance to interact with the chef as well as fellow customers as they wait in line. For many, this is a fun, social experience that draws people in (Moma, 2017). Food truck consumers like the experience of dining at food trucks not just the food. They enjoy conversing with fellow customers and employees (Linnekin et al., 2011). Consumers like to support local businesses where they find they can enjoy a unique, fresh meal. Many would rather give their money to a small business than a faceless corporation (Myrick, 2019). This may be why they are willing to pay more for a high-quality product even in a casual setting (Milbrath, 2018, Sundale Research, 2022). The draw of a sense of community helps to explain the relationship that exists in that the more a person visits food trucks, the more likely they are going to revisit (Shin et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine the food truck consumer in a deeper way. Through this deeper look, it is hoped that patterns of behavior in food truck visitors will emerge and that some differences can be identified. This will add to the food truck consumer body of knowledge and hopefully need to some knowledge that can be applicable to the food truck operators as well. Hopefully, patterns will emerge that will help owners attract new customers while increasing their loyal customer base.

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 Sample

The sample included 291 participants that were recruited using Qualtrics online survey platform. The survey included a qualifying question that the participants had eaten at a food truck.

The sample was divided into two groups. The first group the respondents reported they had dined a food trucks 1-5 times and 6-10 times. The second group

the respondents reported they had dined a food trucks 11-20 times, 21-30 times, 31-40 times, and more than 40 times. The first group was called the low visitation group accounting for 55% of the sample. The second group was called the high visitation group accounting for 45% of the sample. The cut off was chosen due to the closest demarcation allowing approximately half the data set to be in the lower number of visits group and half the set to fall into the higher number of visits group. Discriminant analysis was utilized to determine if there were significant differences between the two groups. The Box’s M test was 1233.98 with a significance of <.001 indicating statistically significant differences between the low visitation group and the high visitation group.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Sample Descriptors

Fifty nine percent of the sample was male and 41% female. The most effective means of marketing was those passing by either driving or walking by (33%), social media (32%), word-of -mouth (25%), radio (6%), and newspaper (4%). The good news for food truck operators is that 90% of the effective marketing techniques are free.

The largest portion of the sample have had most of

Table 1. Food Trucks Social

Survey Item	High*	Low*	Significance
Food trucks instill the feeling of excitement when I dine there.	3.30	3.94	<.001
I tend to be more excited dining at a food truck than at a traditional sit down restaurant.	3.04	4.10	<.001
Do you find dining at a food truck is more of an experience than just eating?	3.33	3.78	.453
I like food trucks because I need a break from chain restaurants.	3.37	4.03	<.001
I like the personal interactions that take place when I dine at food trucks (with owners, employees).	3.69	4.24	<.001
I like that there is direct contact with the chef when dining at a food truck.	3.27	4.14	<.001
I like food trucks because I like to see my food prepared in front of me.	3.07	3.52	<.001
Do you feel like you are part of a community when you dine at food trucks?	2.62	4.40	<.001
I like food trucks because it allows me to meet new people.	3.12	3.89	<.001
I tend to go to food trucks because my colleagues, friends, and families like to go to them.	4.10	3.31	<.001

*5-item Likert Scale anchored by 1 as ‘strongly agree’ and 5 as ‘strongly disagree’, respectively

Table Two focuses on the food aspect of the food truck. All items indicated significant differences between the two groups. The low number of visits group was more likely to agree with the likelihood to

their meals from a food truck at a street location (43%), food truck event (28%), special events (22%), and outside of work. It is promising that the population is seeking street food trucks as a destination and not just visiting during a food truck event or special event. The type of food that they are seeking is diverse. The top five foods most enjoyed at food trucks included: Mexican, Burgers. Asian, Sandwiches (Deli, Philly Cheese Steak), and Bar-b-que.

4.2 Comparing Groups

It is clear there is quite a difference between the low and high visitation groups. Table One focuses on the social draw of food trucks. Eight of the nine items were significant. The low number of visits group was more inclined to agree that food trucks were exciting and feel like it is more of an experience where they can meet new people. Additionally, the low number of visits group liked the idea of being able to interact with employees and the chef while their food is made in front of them more than the high visit group. They were more likely to agree that they were more likely to dine at food trucks in order to get a break from chain restaurants. The one item where the high visits group agreed more involved wanting to go to food trucks because colleagues, friends, and families liked the food truck experience (see Table One).

be more adventurous and try new things while dining at food trucks. The high number of visits group found food trucks to be more innovative than their local restaurants and liked the variety of food offered.

Table 2. *Food Trucks Food*

	High *	Low*	Significance
I tend to be more adventurous in trying new things when I dine at food trucks than when I dine at sit down restaurants.	3.12	3.83	<.001
I have tried new cuisines at food trucks.	3.15	3.92	<.001
Do you find food trucks offer more innovative food than you can find in your local area restaurants?	4.10	3.16	<.001
Are you more likely to try out different variety of cuisines when dining at a food truck than when dining at a restaurant?	2.62	4.40	<.001
I like food trucks because of the variety of food that is offered.	3.73	3.11	<.001
I like it that food trucks elevate casual dishes.	3.58	4.12	<.001

*5-item Likert Scale anchored by 1 as 'strongly agree' and 5 as 'strongly disagree', respectively.

The final table also showed all items as statistically significantly different between groups. The low number of visits group was more in agreement on the convenience items than the high number of visits group. They will pay more to be able to dine at a convenient location and are more likely to enjoy a simple menu. The higher number of visit group was more likely to be drawn to food trucks because they

can find inexpensive gourmet meals and can lower expenditures than compared to traditional sit-down restaurant expenditures. Somewhat surprising, the low number of visits group was more loyal to the food truck owner. They want to dine at food trucks to support local businesses and they would likely support a traditional sit down restaurant if the food truck operator decided to open one (see Table Three

Table 3. *Convenience, Money, and Support*

	High *	Low*	Significance
Do you dine at food trucks because of convenience?	3.08	4.04	<.001
I will pay more at food trucks because of the convenience (their location).	2.74	3.42	<.001
I like food trucks because their menus are simple. I do not have to think about what to order.	3.03	3.29	.042
I like food trucks because they are inexpensive yet offer gourmet food.	3.30	4.11	<.001
Do you spend less money when you dine at food trucks than at a traditional sit-down restaurant?	2.62	4.40	<.001
I like dining at food trucks because I like supporting small businesses.	2.98	3.97	<.001
If I like a food truck if the owners decide to open a traditional sit-down restaurant, I will most likely try it.	3.27	4.01	<.001

*5-item Likert Scale anchored by 1 as 'strongly agree' and 5 as 'strongly disagree', respectively.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

By segmenting their population of visitors into groups based on visitations, food truck operators can execute targeted strategies at enhancing the experience of both low visitation groups and high visitation segments. Specifically, the cut off point for this study was when the two groups were closest to 50% of the sample population where the low number of visits group was 10 times and less. Factors strongest among the low visitation group included being drawn to the excitement and the experience of the food truck. Secondly, although the food was a driver for their visit, being part of the community was an equally important cause for their visit. Neighborhood locations could be ideal to attract these new customers. Additionally, they want to engage with the employees and the owner while they see their food is being prepared. In this way, the food truck owner needs to realize

the importance of the interactions making sure they and their employees understand effective customer interaction. Finally, the low visitation group likes the novelty of food trucks so they can get away from chain restaurants.

The high visitation group may more likely to be “foodies” that do not usually dine at chain restaurants. The high visitation group likes to go to food trucks because their colleagues, friends and family dine there. A food truck operator may look into providing discounts to customers that recommend their food truck on social media.

The low visitation group is more likely to be more adventurous when dining at food trucks. This does not mean the high number of visits group does not seek different types of food but maybe that they likely dine more at non-traditional restaurants than the low

number of visit groups. An idea to encourage the low visitation group to visit a food truck could be to offer samples while they are waiting in line. The high visitation groups is more likely to be foodies and are drawn to food trucks for their innovative food. One marketing campaign to increase the high visitation group would be menu enhancement. Even if it is one dish on the menu that is out of the box providing something that is unique will attract this high number of visits group. Additionally special campaigns surrounding the special knowledge about the food items may be added as an experience enhancer to the guests who are more likely also there to enhance their food knowledge.

The low visitation group is initially seeking convenience. They will pay more just to not have to put a great deal of time and energy into the experience. Attracting new customers is always essential. Food truck events that are located near high population residential neighborhoods will be the best bet in attracting this group. The high visitation group likes the idea that they can find gourmet food at a reasonable price. They are more likely to be “foodies” so more of their discretionary income likely goes towards culinary experiences. As foodies, they are more likely to favor sit down restaurants that cost more so finding upscale food in a different environment is a draw. Food truck owners need to ensure that they provide elevated dishes less than they would spend at a restaurant to continue to attract the high visitation group. Finally, the low visitation group is more loyal to interactions with the food truck owner. They like to support small businesses and it is probably one of the reasons they like to engage with the chef and employees. If the owner is not on the truck, they need to make certain they make appearances from time to time so the customer feels they are supporting a person, not just a business.

This study provided a deeper investigation of the food truck consumer segmenting those by frequency of visits. Statistically significant differences were found between the groups across the items tested. Since one of the most basic marketing elements for any business is knowing the customer well, such customer surveying would be helpful to food truck owners for experience enhancement. Additionally, if each visit resulted in some data being collected based on number of visits, the food truck business will benefit from enhanced consumer knowledge allowing them to enhance their food truck experience differently based on what type of consumer they are serving.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This initial exploratory study was a brief look into the food truck consumer. Most meaning seemed to be extractable from the data by segmenting the demographic into two groups or segments based on frequency of visits. Due to the output, a future research emanating from this study include more in-depth study into the life cycle of the typical food truck consumer. Replication of the study in various locations to see if the patterns of differences found hold across the population would be helpful. Though the study used items that attracted the consumer to food trucks ranging from community involvement to convenience in the initial study, future studies with valid and reliable measurement scales would enhance the rigor and provide more robust output for future marketing models. As such, it is recommended that future studies continue to study visitation patterns of food truck consumers using marketing scales. Applied suggestions were also supplied for managers and owners of food trucks. By dividing the population into two segments, it is more likely to enhance the experience of food truck visitors hopefully creating loyal food truck visitors who visit food trucks more often.

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