

## Making Menus Friendly: Marketing Your Food Intolerance Expertise

The public's growing interest in allergens and food intolerance seems a buffet of opportunity for registered dietitians (RDs), and those in the field advise their colleagues to step up to the line and help themselves. Identifying and actively marketing one's potential services are the keys to successfully working with either the health care or commercial food industry. This is particularly the case in situations involving celiac disease and gluten intolerance. RDs have a unique opportunity to address these growing concerns from a number of vantage points, as some in the field are already doing.

Veronica Alicea, MBA, RD, and Dina Aronson, MS, RD, offered a joint presentation at the American Dietetic Association's Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE) in November 2010, titled "Emerging Opportunities for RDs in the Restaurant Industry" (1). And since that time, each woman's business has continued to expand. The number of restaurants incorporating gluten-free dishes into their menus is increasing rapidly, and many menus are also being developed with the help of recipe analysis and the goal of being "allergen-friendly." This represents opportunities for those with the scientific background needed to create the process.

Commenting on the marketability of RDs' food and nutrition expertise, Alicea remarked that, "It's very powerful that we're dietitians."

Whether consulting with restaurants on the creation of gluten-free menus, or marketing one's services online, RDs can use their credentials to not only change the world through

nutrition, but advance their own careers along the way.

### RESTAURANTS OPEN FOR BUSINESS

While a background in business is not requisite for marketing oneself, lessons learned in that field can be helpful. Graduating from college in the 1970s, Alicea described hers as an eclectic career in the fields of business and nutrition. Laden with student loans upon graduation, she decided against completing her dietetic internship and took a job selling pharmaceuticals for Bristol-Meyers Squibb (New York, NY). There she earned her master's degree in business administration. Years later she would return to school to complete her dietetic internship and re-enter the nutrition field, but the lessons she learned in the corporate world stayed with her as CEO and founder of Celinal Foods in Bridgewater, NJ.

In 1996, while a dietitian in a long-term care facility, Alicea became acquainted with a start-up company that marketed direct-to-home specialty nutrition products for patients. After taking a position with that group she learned about the growing number of people suffering from celiac disease. From that experience, Celinal Foods was born.

For RDs with a professional background in the science of celiac disease, the primary barrier to working with foodservice providers, restaurants in particular, could be a reluctance to knock on the requisite doors. Alicea's experience, however, demonstrates that often times, that's exactly what it takes. She also recommends that independent RDs, in the process of building a client list, study techniques that have worked in other fields, and use them to market their food and nutrition knowledge.

"Dietitians recreate the wheel a lot," she observes, pointing out that publications such as *Harvard Busi-*

*ness Review* also study behavior change, just from a different perspective. Reading up and learning to use data from a variety of sources can be extremely useful for an independent practitioner, especially as it pertains to "filling the holes" left open by the market. Those holes, she explained, represent opportunity.

In addition to work with restaurants, Alicea provides health care facilities with microwaveable single-serve gluten-free products that remain uncontaminated during preparation. Many facilities use a diet of exclusion for their gluten-free and food-allergic patients, putting them at nutrition risk with fewer calories, vitamins, and minerals. Designed for busy kitchens with occasional gluten-free diets and emergency supplies, the company helps make any facility allergen-friendly while controlling costs. She admits they are not designed to provide a culinary experience, rather a safe meal.

Whether dealing with restaurants or health care facilities, it's important to explain the intricacies of gluten-friendly or allergy-friendly food preparation. In fact, Alicea steers restaurant owners away from advertising the term "allergen-free" as it's simply too tough to guarantee. Using terms such as "allergen-friendly," along with disclaimers and notations informing customers that workers have been trained in allergen awareness, is a safer method for all concerned.

"I work with the independent, mom-and-pop operations and small, local chains," she said, explaining her role as a full-service consultant to restaurant companies too small to employ in-house dietitians, but large enough to recognize the growing demand. "Restaurant owners are interested in it."

According to the Celiac Disease Foundation (2), celiac disease is a lifelong inherited autoimmune condition affecting both children and adults.

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When people suffering from celiac disease eat foods containing gluten, it creates an immune-mediated toxic reaction that causes damage to the small intestine and prevents food from being properly absorbed. Gluten is the common name for proteins found in specific grains, notably all forms of wheat, including durum, semolina, spelt, kamut, einkorn, and faro. Also, related grains, such as rye, barley, and triticale, must be eliminated from the diet, even to the point of preventing cross-contact at the point of preparation.

One of every 133 people in the United States is affected by the disease, and between 5% and 15% of their offspring will inherit it. In 70% of identical twin pairs, both twins inherit it, and family members with an autoimmune disease are at a 25% increased risk of having celiac disease, the Foundation reports (2).

Celiac disease is an autoimmune disease. Unlike allergies, it's not likely to change as a person ages. Meanwhile, food allergies are widespread among the "Big Eight," which include milk, egg, soy, peanuts, tree

nuts, fish, shellfish, and wheat. According to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, as many as 12 million Americans suffer from food allergies (3).

To the restaurant industry, that number represents millions of potential customers and the families they bring with them for dinner. RDs possess not only the credentials needed to tailor menus and analyze recipes, but to consult on food preparation and related safety measures.

As Alicea says, "The dietitian can help the restaurant be successful in all facets of its operation."

Some statistics show that a restaurant could increase its gross sales by as much as 9% by offering allergen-friendly and gluten-friendly menus, she says, noting that those statistics might be on the high side. Still, any increase in business is enough to get a restaurant owner's attention. This is particularly true if RDs are also Serv-Save Certified and can offer a menu of their own services, ranging from food safety and preparation training to menu analysis. Alicea emphasizes the need to take a value-added approach

and advises RDs to market themselves as what they are, multidimensional food and nutrition experts. Instead of simply offering to analyze recipes for menu labeling, approach the owner with a full-service package of options. This can be broached as an all-inclusive package for a single price that may also be broken down into à la carte options such as recipe analysis or gluten-friendly menu labeling services.

"Production is as important as procurement," she said, explaining that a restaurant can purchase all the right ingredients, but this can be ruined with one mistake. The foodservice industry has high turnover rates, and training workers is just one more service the RD can provide.

A common restaurant practice Alicea described as problematic is the placement of broccoli in the same water used to boil pasta. Many chefs use butter throughout the cooking process, and yet more "dredge" their products in flour. Less than  $\frac{1}{8}$  of a teaspoon of gluten can cause a reaction in those with celiac disease, and people allergic to dairy products can be

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