

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 microwavable 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

equally sensitive. Menu items advertised as gluten-friendly or allergy-friendly can still make customers sick if they've been cross-contaminated during preparation.

"The problem ingredients would be the unexpected ingredients," she said, emphasizing that each new employee represents a threat to the owner and an opportunity for the RD offering educational services.

Alicea is in the process of authoring a book on how to help noncommercial food facilities go gluten-friendly and allergen-friendly, and she said marketing oneself is a key to success in business. In past years, she's taught college classes on the topic, not so much for the pay but for the exposure. Membership in organizations such as the National Restaurant Association and local Chambers of Commerce keep entrepreneurial RDs abreast of opportunities while allowing them to network with decision-makers. Staying up to date on state and local health codes can allow one to establish a relationship with Department of Health personnel, who can likewise be valuable contacts for referral.

And 21st century RDs need modern methods of marketing. Aronson, Alicea's co-presenter at FNCE, designed the Web site for Celinal Foods, and her companies, Welltech Solutions and Welltech Bistro, provide customized software for the restaurant industry, ranging from recipe analysis to calorie calculation, both of which can serve as tools for RDs seeking work consulting restaurants regarding celiac disease and allergens.

Like all businesses, Aronson's is marketing-driven and she described the methods used to help sell her services. "You have to be tech-savvy and a little daring," she said, noting the same strategies apply to colleagues working with the restaurant industry.

Combing databases to find the names of owners and managers is followed by e-mails with links to her site, as well as follow-up calls and messages. And as in any profession, networking and keeping abreast of what others are doing in the field is invaluable.

CLIENTS WAITING IN LINE

Nationally, the restaurant industry is aware of gluten-intolerance and aller-

gen-intolerance, and would appear eager to learn more. In May, the 2011 National Restaurant Association Show featured a forum on the issue, "Gluten-Free and Allergen-Free: Nutritious, Safe, and Profitable," moderated by Ellen Karlin, MMSc, RD, LDN, FADA. In addition to an overview of what celiac disease and allergens are and the numbers of potential customers affected, Karlin's presentation provided information about foods that provide nutrient-dense, gluten-free, and allergen-friendly meals. And among the resources listed at the end of her presentation was www.eatright.org, the Web site of the American Dietetic Association, serving as an opening for interested RDs (4).

Alicea herself attended the 2011 show in Chicago and said RDs interested in working with restaurants would be well served to do the same. Networking among industry decision-makers is a prime way to find potential clients and demonstrate the value of an RD—expertise. And as Aronson and Alicea explained in their FNCE presentation, the commercial food world has come a long way since the first restaurant opened in Paris, France, in 1765. With more than 1 million American locations, the restaurant industry has projected annual sales of \$580 billion, handled by 12.7 million employees who come and go regularly. The restaurant industry's share of the food dollar is about 49% (1). Given that volume of potential clients, and the attention focused on celiac disease and allergens, simply introducing yourself is an important first step. The 2012 show will be hosted on May 19-22 at McCormick Place in Chicago, IL, and information about participation opportunities is available at www.restaurants.org.

AGGRESSIVELY MARKETING YOURSELF

It's difficult to lack for ideas when talking to Toby Amidor, MS, RD, CDN. A nutrition expert for TheFoodNetwork.com (New York, NY), Amidor also serves as nutrition advisor for Sears FitStudio (Hoffman Estates, IL), while contributing articles and consultation to companies such as the CookingChannel.com (Knoxville, TN), Food Network Kitchens (New York, NY), and CookingLight.com (Birmingham, AL). Since 1999, she has been teaching aspiring chefs

about nutrition, food safety, and restaurant management at The Art Institute of New York City's online division, as well as serving as an adjunct professor at the Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City.

Opportunities in the field of restaurant consultation are wide open. "There's a lot more room there and I'm not going anywhere," laughs Amidor. The areas of gluten and allergens are particularly hot right now, and she teaches courses on both. While restaurants and the public at-large are aware and very interested in the issue, inaccurate sources of information are a constant problem.

"RDs really need to get in there," she says. Mass media can be used by legitimate nutrition experts just as easily as marketers of pseudoscience. Members of the public interested in health might be using a personal trainer for exercise, and while that specialist is trained in the area of fitness, his or her knowledge of nutrition might be lacking. Internet sites and magazine articles about nutrition are sometimes difficult to distinguish from advertisements crafted to resemble scientific data.

"It's a very hard battle," according to Amidor. As an example, consider the difference between recommending a client consume 1 gram of protein per pound, or kilogram, of body weight. Depending on the source a person uses, or his or her interpretation of that source, the difference is obviously immense, she said. The same principle holds true for allergen and gluten information. RDs need to be at the forefront of these topics to ensure that proper information is made available, she said.

Recounting a conversation with a physician, Amidor said that the doctor attempted to refer a patient with suspected gluten issues to the RD who worked with his practice, and was rebuffed. The RD didn't feel confident enough in that area, but simply turned down the opportunity instead of referring the physician to a colleague.

"There are so many opportunities out there," says Amidor, recalling an instance at a hospital 10 years ago where she watched staff bring food with gluten to a patient in a clearly marked "gluten-free" bed. Training and education have improved mark-

edly over the years, but it's a continual process and must be maintained with each new staff member hired by the facility or restaurant.

Whether more people are getting allergies today than in past years, or the public is simply more aware of those that already exist, is up for debate. But the impact that nutrition can play in people's lives is well documented. Childhood allergies can change over time, and pediatricians represent another opportunity for RDs seeking referral. Nutritional needs must be met regardless of whether a child is allergic to, say, milk, and RDs need to be the experts consulted in that process.

But although health care is a field long known to be ripe for work, commercial food establishments might not come as readily to mind. While vacationing in Las Vegas, NV, Amidor took note of how well-marked menus have become. The market has demanded, and is receiving, menus customized for all tastes from vegan to gluten-free. But even as the market embraces this idea, the constant battle with unlicensed "nutritionists" is ever-present, and one that RDs need to take on at full speed.

"You just need to know how to package yourself, and I'm still working on that myself," Amidor says.

Marketing strategies she's employed include hosting National Nutrition Month seminars at restaurants with topics discussed ranging from gluten-free menus to allergen-friendly preparation methods—which not only serves to increase an RD's name recognition, but also brings potential customers to the restaurant. Getting solid nutritional advice out to the masses not only helps the individual practitioner, but lends credence to the profession and helps establish the RD credential as the brand of choice. Writing articles and teaching classes on the topic can have the same effect, and Amidor's credentials range from reviewing the Jewish cultural food section of the Web-based Nutrition Care Manual to serving as a reviewer for the National Restaurant Association Education Foundation's ServSafe video series. She is also cited as the nutrition expert in articles for *Working Mother Magazine*, the *New York Daily News*, and *Fitness*. All of these credentials come into play when approaching business owners. The key

is to approach clients with confidence and show them the full array of offerings an RD can provide.

"That's how I got half of my jobs. I was the first one to apply," she laughs, emphasizing the importance of returning phone calls, e-mails, and other points of contact.

MAKE THE PITCH

Alicea said she gets about 300 e-mails a day from her ongoing marketing drives, and if things go well at the National Restaurant Association's annual show, she should get even more. That show and others like it often offer free admission to RDs and present an opportunity to network with decision-makers selling their own services. When approaching a restaurant, she advises RDs to go through management to find the name of the owner. Small chains might include several restaurants bearing different names, and it's important to find the right person amid the mix.

"Generally, you'll find that the owner is the operator in one of the restaurants," she said. RDs need to remember that restaurant owners are business people, and they often follow the path of least financial resistance. Offering a menu full of services, grouped together as a package but available individually, helps them feel they're getting the most for their dollar and empowers their sense of options. And while simply identifying that menu items might not cost much to restaurant owners, altering their recipes can vary their overhead in either direction. Changing a single ingredient can transform a dish into a gluten-free offering, and knowing whether that switch raises or lowers the cost is a crucial element of the pitch. If the ingredient switch lowers the cost, the argument for that move seems obvious. Even if the ingredient switch increases the cost, the argument can be made that labeling could increase sales volume.

Historically, gluten-free and allergen-free menu items lacked taste, and adherents simply learned to "eat naked," minus the gravies and sauces accompanying other foods. Today, people expect healthy and delicious options that meet their dietary needs, so teaching restaurant staff how to prepare these dishes in a different

manner, keeping food safety and flavor in mind, is a valuable service and an excellent opportunity for RDs to expand their professional horizons.

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