

2026

cater the opportunity

*Foodservice Guide To
Catering Success*



A Bigger Opportunity is On the Menu

Catering has moved past the special occasion; it's everywhere.

Recurring workplace lunches, morning meetings, team gatherings, watch parties, small celebrations, and events built around the food itself now run through catering programs.

For operators, a strong catering program puts your food in front of people who have never visited your establishment and generates sales in the hours between your busiest dayparts. Done well, one occasion becomes a standing order.

Today's catering customer is also asking for more than volume. Ordering has to be easy, and the menu has to work for a room with different preferences and restrictions. Food has to arrive looking and tasting the way it did when it left the kitchen. Whether the order feeds ten people or 100, it has to feel worth what they paid.

This guide explores insights and practical ways to help you harness the power and potential of catering.

The Menu

Growing Demand.....	2
Success Strategies.....	3
Master the Menu.....	6
Catering Trends.....	7
Packaging to Perfection...	15

Table STAKES



White Round Plate with Silver Decorative Rings

Why Consider Catering?

CAPTURES NEW MARKETS

Catering enables operators to expand beyond their regular customer base and reach new audiences. A positive experience can also lead to word-of-mouth referrals and new business.

PROVIDES ADDITIONAL REVENUE STREAM

Adding catering creates an additional revenue stream beyond regular foodservice operations, helping to stabilize the business against fluctuations in traffic and seasonal changes.

CAN LEAD TO HIGHER PROFIT MARGINS

Catering events often command premium pricing and can be pre-planned, leading to better profit margins compared to daily operations.

MAXIMIZES CURRENT RESOURCES

Operators can leverage current kitchen, staff, and equipment during off-peak hours to meet catering demand.

The person ordering lunch for a Tuesday meeting has one job: feed forty people without it becoming a problem. Where the food comes from is a detail. Whether it arrives hot, presents well enough to put in front of a client, and can be arranged in a single phone call is the whole decision.

That's the occasion growing across every channel at once, and it's why **operators from very different businesses now find themselves competing for the same catering order.**

Catering platform Monkey's 2026 State of Catering report projects the **U.S. catering market will grow 5.3 percent annually through 2032**, and top-performing brands reported between **10 and 20 percent year-over-year catering sales growth during Q1 2026.**

Operators who build the infrastructure to support it, from menu packages built for volume to packaging that travels well, are **capturing growth that their competitors are leaving on the table.**

Success STRATEGIES

Catering can be a natural and profitable extension of existing foodservice operations. From company parties to weddings to family gatherings, there's consistent demand for catering services across various segments.

Operators can succeed by identifying the right opportunities, understanding what consumers are looking for, and staying ahead of trends to stand out in the market.



FIND YOUR SWEET SPOT



MASTER THE MENU



STAY AHEAD OF TRENDS

FIND YOUR CATERING

Sweet Spot

There is more than one way to inject catering revenue into your current business. One effective approach is to specialize in specific sectors, such as corporate catering or everyday occasions, allowing for tailored services that meet unique client needs.

Types of Catering Occasions

	Occasion	Considerations
SOCIAL	• Celebrations • Dinner Parties • Event Parties • Family-Style Gathering • Holidays	• Ease of transport • Ability to serve/eat from • Ease in prep • Presentation • Temperature
CORPORATE	• Board Meetings • Corporate Outings • Happy Hour • Luncheons/Meal Incentives • Office Parties & Service • Trainings/Seminars • Holidays	• Delivery/Drop Off Service • Ability to serve from • Presentation • Temperature
SPECIAL EVENT	• Black Tie Events • Ceremonial Events • Charities • Cocktail Parties • Milestone Celebrations • Weddings	• Upscale Presentation • Service Execution • Innovative Experience • Temperature

TOTAL
CATERING
MARKET

63%

B2C/social catering

37%

B2B catering



Lunchbox IO, 2024



SOCIAL CATERING

Social celebrations such as parties, community gatherings, and even weeknight dinners create incremental revenue opportunities for catering packages aligned with everyday occasions. Multi-serve and family-style programs can bridge the gap between individual takeout meals and large party catering events.

BUSINESS CATERING

Corporate clients represent a significant portion of the catering market, with businesses frequently seeking meal solutions for meetings, conferences, and employee events. Especially as workplaces are looking for ways to keep employees engaged as they return to the office, catering's role can offer an attractive and delicious incentive. Oftentimes, employees are given a short window to break for lunch or a snack, so convenience is key.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Special events provide the chance to shine with unique, tailored offerings. These occasions, from weddings to galas, demand custom menus that reflect themes, seasons, or client wishes. Innovative approaches like interactive food stations or live cooking can elevate the dining experience. Collaboration with event planners and vendors ensures smooth execution.

Attention to detail is crucial in executing a flawless event, from decor to dish presentation. By excelling in special event catering, businesses can differentiate themselves from competitors and build a reputation for excellence. Satisfied clients are likely to recommend the service to others, leading to more bookings and opportunities.

While the differences are not always clear, to achieve guest satisfaction, **operators need to recognize who the consumers are, their involvement in the dining experience, and how their satisfaction will be measured.** Business consumers primarily value their guest satisfaction, while social consumers primarily value personal satisfaction. By identifying and focusing on target markets and demographics, foodservice operators can tailor their offerings to meet specific needs, thereby expanding their market share and driving sustained growth.

MASTER *The menu*

The menu is the heart and soul of a catering business. It showcases culinary expertise and entices potential customers.

A well-crafted and appealing menu can be a powerful advertising tool, drawing people to your services now and in the future.



Clear Onyx Platter

BBQ/Grilled Foods: 50%

Desserts: 43.3%

Chicken Dishes: 41.2%

Appetizers: 39.7%

Traditional/Cultural Foods: 37.5%

Salads: 36.8%

Source: FLIP, 2025

MOST POPULAR CATERING MENU *items*

STAY AHEAD of Catering Trends

Foodservice operators must constantly adapt to evolving consumer preferences and market shifts to maintain a competitive edge.

By being trend-aware, caterers can anticipate customer needs, introduce innovative menu items, and enhance service offerings.



CATERING AS THE great connector

Food has the ability to bring people together. When consumers gather over a meal, they are more likely to engage in meaningful conversations and develop deeper connections. Catering elevates this connective power of food by enhancing the overall experience.

Foodservice operators can not only provide delicious fare but also create an environment that encourages interaction, sharing, and discussion, such as family-style meals, shared platters, or interactive food stations.

Focusing on the sensory aspects of food—taste, aroma, and presentation—can forge memorable moments that resonate with guests long after the event ends. Signature dishes, unique flavor combinations, and visually stunning presentations contribute to the event's success.

WORKPLACE CATERING *is Working Overtime*

Workplace catering is becoming a weekly line item instead of a quarterly one. As companies work harder to make in-office days worth the commute, food is one of the easiest ways to do it. That pushes catering demand well past the all-hands meeting and into breakfast, team lunches, the mid-afternoon slump, employee appreciation events and after-hours gatherings.



91%

of workplaces plan to spend the same or more on food in 2026.

1 in 5

plans to increase workplace food spending by more than 25%.

26%

Daily or weekly employee meal programs have grown 26% year over year.

Cater the Opportunity

Build packages around occasions that already repeat:

- Breakfast meetings
- Team lunches
- Employee appreciation
- Training sessions
- New-hire onboarding
- Afternoon snack breaks
- Happy hours
- Client meetings
- Holiday and milestone celebrations

Packaging Opportunity

Presentation becomes part of customer acquisition. Packaging that arrives sealed and holds food the way the kitchen plated it says something about the caterer behind the meal.



UltraStack® Platters

Smaller gatherings REAL VOLUME

+70%

of consumers entertain at home at least monthly.

IHA, 2026

Plenty of catering happens for smaller groups. It shows up in the workplace as team celebrations, client meetings, and workshops. At home, consumers are increasingly turning to catered solutions for at-home entertaining, holidays, game days, and social gatherings, driving demand for shareable formats.

Small social gatherings are all catering occasions, and people are prioritizing them as they look for more personal experiences. Operators with a high order minimum are turning that business away without realizing it.

Cater the Opportunity

Build catering tiers for different group sizes instead of designing the whole program around large events. Smaller packages give catering an easy entry point for customers who don't think they need catering.



6-10

Team lunch or family-style meal



10-20

Client meeting or celebration



20-50

Office event or party



50+

Traditional large-format catering



Clear Round Bowl



Pulp Catering Platter

Packaging Opportunity

Think modular. Smaller platters, bowls and serving pieces let operators scale a presentation up or down without changing how it looks.

TREND

GIVE GUESTS THE POWER To Personalize



Today's catering table has to serve more preferences than ever. One guest wants extra protein, another is vegetarian, a third is avoiding an allergen, and several just want their meal the way they like it. Customers expect personalized catering experiences, with customizable menu options that support the needs of every guest.

Cater the Opportunity

Think components instead of combinations. Familiar menu items convert into customizable catering with very little added prep. Customization gives guests choice and gives the kitchen a controlled ingredient list to work from. Clear labeling makes it easier still, especially around allergens and dietary preferences.

- **Taco bar:** proteins + tortillas + toppings + sauces
- **Grain bowl bar:** bases + proteins + vegetables + toppings
- **Sandwich spread:** sandwiches + salads + sides + condiments
- **Pasta station:** pasta + sauces + proteins + toppings
- **Breakfast bar:** eggs + proteins + breads + fruits + toppings



Catering Pop Top Bowl



Kraft Pop Up Catering Tray

+60%

of catering orders include at least one dietary preference.

ezCater, 2026

Packaging Opportunity

Compartmented containers, portion cups, bowls and packaging you can identify at a glance keep components organized and make build-your-own meals easier to execute.



TREND

Familiar Food, **BIGGER FLAVOR**

Comfort food is having a moment, and it's getting more interesting. Consumers are gravitating toward **familiar dishes carrying flavors and influences from around the world**: recognizable enough to please a group, different enough to be worth talking about. For catering, that combination is close to ideal.

Think Korean-inspired chicken, Mediterranean grain bowls, Caribbean-influenced entrées, birria-style tacos or globally spiced sandwiches. For a customer trying to please a crowd, a familiar format with an unexpected flavor is an easier sell than a dish nobody at the table recognizes.

Start with the dishes your operation already executes well, then add flavor through:

- Globally inspired sauces
- Seasonings and spice blends
- Toppings
- Dips
- Sides
- Condiments

Cater the Opportunity



Packaging Opportunity

Sauces, dips and toppings do most of the customization work. Keeping them separate in transit protects food quality and hands the final call to the guest.

DON'T LEAVE BEVERAGES

Off The Order

Food gets top billing and beverages get forgotten. Coffee, tea, lemonade, aguas frescas, specialty drinks and other batch beverages add to the check and give the customer one less stop to make.

Cater the Opportunity

Build beverage prompts into the ordering flow.

"Would you like drinks?" gets a no.

"Complete your lunch for 20: entrées + sides + beverages + dessert" gets an order.



Beverage On the Move®

Packaging Opportunity

Beverages have to survive the drive and pour cleanly on arrival. Secure transport and easy dispensing let operators add them to off-premises orders without worrying about the handoff.



Morning

coffee + tea + juice



Lunch

Lemonade + tea + bottled beverages



Celebration

specialty beverages + mocktails

Waste Less OF THE OPPORTUNITY



Sustainability has become an operational and customer priority.

Operators need enough food to feed the group without generating leftovers nobody wants, and customers still expect the convenience that disposable packaging provides. Food waste, portioning, and packaging end up in the same conversation.

Embracing sustainable catering practices can involve careful menu planning to avoid overproduction, using eco-friendly packaging materials such as recyclable or compostable alternatives, incorporating organic and local ingredients, and adopting waste-reduction strategies like donating excess food to local food banks.

Packaging Opportunity

Right-sized packaging supports portion planning and cuts excess material. Secure lids and containers that protect food help preserve leftovers, rather than sending uneaten food straight to the bin.

Where the infrastructure exists, recyclable or compostable options give operators another way to connect catering to their sustainability goals.

72%

of caterers rely on sustainable measures such as **local ingredients and **reduced packaging** to meet customer expectations.**

Univents, 2026

Cater The Opportunity

Help customers order accurately by communicating serving sizes and headcounts clearly. Offer more than one package size instead of defaulting to large format for every order. Favor foods that hold and travel well and stay usable if they aren't eaten right away.

When you select packaging, factor in what happens to it after the meal.



A MATTER OF convenience

Great food loses to a difficult ordering process, a late delivery or a setup the customer can't figure out. Operational ease is part of what catering customers are buying.

The same holds on your side of the counter. A catering program that creates chaos during the lunch rush won't last, no matter how good the sales look.

Cater The Opportunity

Build your program for repeatability.

Ask:

- Can customers understand the menu quickly?
- Can they order digitally?
- Are minimums and lead times clear?
- Are portions described by headcount?
- Can the kitchen execute the menu efficiently?
- Are items easy to pack and verify?
- Can staff quickly identify what belongs in each order?
- Is setup intuitive for the customer?

Even **menu descriptions matter**. 2026 ezCater data found that more descriptive menus receive twice as many bookings on its platform.

Ordering should be easy, and execution should be repeatable. Reordering should take almost no effort at all.



Packaging Opportunity

Standardized packaging supports standardized execution. Deciding which package goes with each menu item simplifies training and improves order accuracy.

Clients and their guests also appreciate packaging that is easy to handle and open. Ergonomically designed containers with features like ample grip space keep food displays intact and make the dining experience more enjoyable and hassle-free.





PACKAGING TO *perfection*

From buffet-style foil pans and uninspiring food lining the table, catering has evolved significantly.

Whether serving hot meals, cold dishes, or convenient snacks, caterers aim to replicate the quality and presentation of restaurant dining. Operators now recognize that food packaging and presentation **are crucial** to creating a positive experience.

Thanks to advancements in food packaging innovation, caterers can now offer a wider variety of menu items without compromising on quality, safety, and aesthetic appeal. **Proper food packaging solutions have expanded the possibilities for catering services, allowing them to meet diverse client needs and expectations.**

HOW TO QUALIFY

Catering Menu Items

Do ingredients exist within the current menu?

Is the recipe easy to make and scale?

How well does the food travel in packaging?

How well does the food hold and maintain integrity before being served?

Does the food present well in packaging?





PRESENTATION

In a world of social media and influencers, caterers are not just chefs; they are culinary artists, employing creative presentation techniques to turn each dish into a visual masterpiece. Interactive food stations and build-your-own bars add an element of engagement and customization to events.

Thematic catering takes this a notch higher, with every element of the food and drink experience designed to complement the event's theme, be it a roaring twenties cocktail party or a rustic countryside wedding.

The aesthetics of food play a pivotal role in the overall dining experience, with caterers using color, texture, and composition to create dishes that are as pleasing to the eye as they are to the palate.

Layer by Layer



To take your plating to the next level, consider incorporating vertical elements and layering techniques.

- Stack ingredients or use tall, narrow serving vessels
- Create layers of flavors and textures within a single dish
- Utilize garnishes and sauces to add height and visual interest

DEVELOPING THE RIGHT *packaging strategy*

When approaching a food packaging strategy, there are a number of factors to consider.

Durability

Fitness for Use

Presentation

Sustainability

Safe & Secure

Customization

Versatility

Convenience

(Culinary) Love **AT FIRST SIGHT**

The moment a guest lays eyes on the food, they begin forming opinions about its quality and taste.

Attractive and functional packaging can enhance the visual presentation of the dishes, making them look more appetizing and sophisticated.

For instance, clear containers showcase vibrant colors and textures, helping the menu items pop and appeal to the clients' senses. Additionally, the use of eco-friendly or premium materials can further elevate the perceived value and quality of the catering service.

Investing in the right solutions is an essential strategy for enhancing the client's dining experience in an industry where first impressions matter.



POWER UP *your brand*



Food packaging offers **unique branding opportunities** to help caterers stand out.

Customized packaging can feature a business's logo, colors, and design elements to reinforce brand identity and visual consistency.

Well-branded packaging can also serve as a marketing tool, spreading awareness from the kitchen to the various events.

Reputation is everything

The success of a catering operation hinges on its reputation. It's not just about delivering consistent quality and service. To truly stand out, caterers must deploy effective marketing strategies. From capitalizing on social media to leveraging testimonials and reviews, there are numerous proven techniques that can help caterers stand out from the competition and drive business growth.

Social Media



Social media platforms offer you channels to showcase your culinary creations and events.

Actively using social media can help you build a strong online presence, attract new clients, and elevate your reputation.

Client Testimonials



Positive testimonials and reviews are a powerful way to attract potential clients. Encourage satisfied clients to leave reviews on popular platforms like Google, Yelp, and social media. Showcase testimonials on your website, in marketing materials, and across your social media channels to build credibility.

Networking



Event planners and office managers often serve as gatekeepers to lucrative opportunities. Begin by identifying key event planners in your area and reaching out to introduce yourself and your services. Attend industry events, trade shows, and local networking gatherings to enhance relationships.



Delivering safe, fresh, and delicious food is a top catering priority. Maintaining the correct temperature of food is essential for both safety and quality. Proper food packaging is designed to keep hot foods hot, and cold foods cold, ensuring that dishes arrive at their destination in the best possible condition.

Clients expect their meals to be served at the right temperature, and failing to meet this expectation can lead to negative reviews.

Packaging such as corrugated paperboard can effectively and efficiently insulate the meal, allowing the transport of a variety of foods without losing their integrity or heat.

Another key component of any catering experience is ensuring that food is protected during transit. No one wants a messy platter where food has spilled or leaked out. Durable packaging features, such as secure locking lids and sturdy construction, help to safely transport food for drop-off catering, take-out/delivery, and food service retail.



Compartmented catering solutions are a win-win as they can easily separate dishes, preventing any food migration and helping to maintain dietary specifications.



YOU COMPLETE *me*

Offering a complete catering program that includes the right disposable items adds value and will contribute positively to customer satisfaction. The ability to offer a variety of different tabletop and serving utensil items helps catering programs align with more occasion types and adds a layer of customization.

Consumers love customization, and having more ways to offer customization will lead to more frequent catering orders.

 **Sabert[®]**
makes food look great[®]
sabert.com