



FOOD TRUCK RALLIES

A gourmet way to create a revenue stream

BY CHRISTINE SCHAFFRAN

The smell of chicken carnitas, wood-fired pizza, and kettle corn wafting through the air may be all you need to sound the dinner bell and welcome patrons to a food truck rally, but combine it with a community purpose and it packs a punch—and a new revenue stream.

In taking advantage of a recent trend, parks and rec agencies across the country are finding success in hosting food truck festivals. For most, the basic components are the same—food trucks, a beer tent, live music, and perhaps some additional entertainment, such as inflatables for kids, demonstrations, or other vendors.

But some are taking it to the next level and adding a fundraising element or other community-guided effort. Here's a look at some successful programs:





AUBURN FOOD TRUCK FESTIVAL, AUBURN, CALIF.

In addition to 14 food trucks, a beer garden, wine from two local wineries, live music, kids’ activities, and over 30 other vendors, The Auburn Food Truck Festival aims to raise funds for a bike park.

“Each time we do it, we generate around ten-thousand dollars,” says Sheryl Petersen, Recreation Services Manager for the Auburn Recreation District. “I think one of the reasons it’s so popular is because it supports a cause that the community can get around.”

The event attracts more than 2,000 people per year to Recreation Park where food trucks are lined up to tempt the taste buds of the locals, while raffles and other attractions support the mission to bring a bike park to the district.

TACOMA FOOD TRUCK FEST, TACOMA, WASHINGTON

The Tacoma Food Truck Fest is taking the rally concept a step further by combining it with a community blood drive.

In five years, attendance has grown from 5,000 to 9,000, and 69 people’s lives have been saved by the blood collected during the 2018 event, according to Phedra Redifer, Regional Parks Manager for Metro Parks Tacoma.

“It was a real eye-opener for us,” she notes. “According

to the data we received, it pulled people from blood types that they normally don’t see en masse.”

FOOD TRUCK RALLY GOES TO THE DOGS, NAMPA, IDAHO

The Nampa Parks and Recreation Department is using its rally to raise money for dog park facilities. Now in its sixth year, the event attracts more than 1,200 people; this year, \$5,000 was raised for dog park amenities. The vendors who attend the event pay a registration fee and then agree to donate 15 percent of their food sales to the cause, says Jennifer Vanderpool, Marketing and Administration Director for Nampa Parks and Recreation.

GETTING STARTED

So what does it take to run a good food truck rally? There are a few key ingredients.

Executive Director Michael Sletten of the River Forest Park District in Illinois says the key for its six-hour family event, which attracts 2,500 people annually, was finding the best day to host it. The end of August seems to be the sweet spot as it does not compete with weather, Sunday football games, or vacation conflicts because kids are back in school by this time.





Sletten notes that a mix of “savory” and “sweet” offerings are a key to keeping people coming back. But—he adds—there are rules for trucks that participate. For instance, serving the same types of food is a major no-no.

“We have eight savory trucks, but they don’t compete with each other,” he notes. “They won’t even talk to us if they think there’s competition in any way.”

Sletten says the department tries to alternate the trucks that participate, bringing in two or three new ones every year.

In Auburn, Petersen agrees that the right blend of flavors is crucial.

“Get a variety of food trucks,” she says. “You don’t want everyone doing hamburgers and French fries.”

She also recommends that trucks serve kid-friendly plates, as some dishes can get a little pricey.

And the most important element—barter where possible and partner with organizations and local businesses to keep the costs down.

“Try to go with organizations where they can make a donation back to you,” Petersen notes. For instance, at the Auburn rally, a local farm store not only sponsors but also provides hay bales that are used for seating. Additionally, the Auburn Ale House donates the beer, which is then sold for profit. Bike stores donate the bikes that are raffled. And then there are the food trucks, which pay \$200 a piece to participate.

Sletten says a partnership with the local Rotary Club allows the two agencies to divide the workload and offer an event that neither could do alone.

Typical expenses include inflatable, tent, table, and chair rentals, as well as an entertainment allowance.

However, when all is said and done, Sletten notes, “This event isn’t that expensive at all for what you’re getting out of it.”

A JOB WELL DONE

In Tacoma, Redifier notes that, instead of looking at expenses, the city uses the Fest as an opportunity to increase economic impact. Local food truck vendors are encouraged to think of it as a way to determine whether they have the community support to transform their mobile operations into “bricks-and-mortar restaurants.”

Regardless, Redifier says that the combination of being centrally located in a park that is bus-accessible with a spray-ground is a homerun for them.

“The trucks form a U-shape around the border, and it creates an arena and intimate experience that people want,” she explains.

At the end of the day, when people can’t eat any more (or trucks run out of food, if you’re really lucky), vendors pull away happy, and the city is left with a little cash to create the next community gathering.

“It’s just a good blend of people hanging out in the park on a beautiful day, and that’s really what it’s all about,” Redifier says. “It is truly a family affair.” **PRB**

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