

Hot Stuff

By Myron Love

Through an imaginative approach to marketing, topped by a strong belief in up-to-date technology, Jerry Cianflone has baked a recipe for success for his Pizza Hotline enterprise in Winnipeg's highly competitive pizza take-out business.

For example, Cianflone claims to have been the first pizza operation to offer 3-for-1 pizzas—and the first to abandon the promotion. Last fall, just before Grey Cup weekend, his seven outlets were featuring 4-for-1 specials and a deal whereby the customer orders one pizza at the regular price, and has the option to order three more of the same size for \$3.00 each.

"We change our flyers constantly because we have found that our customers like change," Cianflone explains. "We continue to honour our promotions even after we launch new ones. Overall, we blend a number of promotions."

Cianflone points out that special deals by themselves do not necessarily lead to repeat business. Rather, they serve as catalysts to encourage people to try Pizza Hotline's products.

"If the product isn't good, they won't order again," he notes. "We have developed a very loyal customer base because we make a good pizza. We stick to standard toppings so that we can run a more efficient operation. With standard items, it is easier to keep our toppings fresh."

Cianflone started in the pizza business nine years ago when he bought a small pizza restaurant—called Colombo's Pizza—from his girlfriend's parents. The restaurant did some take-out, but most of the business was dine-in.

He began to expand the take-out side but soon realized he couldn't effectively manage both dine-in and take-out operations. To be efficient, he had to concentrate on one or the other. He opted to rename the restaurant "Pizza Hotline," and turn it into a strictly take-out business.

By 1989, he had opened a second location. Three years ago, he began to sell franchises.

"It took a while for me to become comfortable with the idea of franchising," he says. "Then it took two years to plan it. By franchising each new

location, we can give the public the hands-on service of a resident owner/operator, something we couldn't do as a chain." Cianflone has developed his own on-site training program for franchisees. It includes some theory and an operating manual, he notes. It is a relatively easy system, and everything is well defined.

"The easy part is making the pizza," claims Cianflone. "The harder part is teaching prospective franchisees

how to deal with people, how to hire and fire employees. I find that by training the franchisees on site, I can observe them and get some idea of how well they will be able to cope."

In the kitchen, Cianflone claims to have been the first independent pizza operator in Winnipeg to use conveyor ovens. He believes that keeping on top of technological changes is a key to success. Technology, he says, helps maintain a product's consistency and reduces costs.

It has also created barriers for a lot of potential competitors. "When I came into the industry in 1987, you could start a pizza take-out and delivery business for \$10,000," he remembers. "All you needed was an oven and a small area. Today, you need \$100,000 to get started. Not only have many people been discouraged from opening pizza take-outs, but I have also seen many go under in the last few years."

As for the future, Cianflone is considering expansion—although he says that he is not actively pursuing franchisees beyond the city.

"I have a lot on my plate," he asserts. "There are a lot of changes I envision for the company. I am constantly refining my system and trying new ideas." —PIZZA-

