

NATION'S Restaurant News.

Pita Pit pop-up building franchise buzz

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Pita Pit has no locations in New York City, but that hasn't stopped the 180-unit chain from generating some Big-Apple-style media buzz through a pop-up restaurant it temporarily operates outside the building where Fox News Corp. broadcasts its "Fox and Friends" morning show.

For the past five Friday mornings, the Coeur d'Alene, Idaho-based chain has been serving breakfast pitas to passersby from the makeshift restaurant and plans to continue service each Friday through the end of August. Vice president of corporate business unit Peter Riggs also will be interviewed on each broadcast.

Riggs said the intent of being featured so prominently on television for eight straight weeks was to spread awareness not only to potential Pita Pit customers, but also to franchisee candidates.

"Ultimately, we're hoping to get to potential franchisees, but the more blunt-object attitude we have just trying to get the Pita Pit name out more," Riggs said. "Any time you can increase brand recognition, that's what we're after."

A recent appearance by Pita Pit on "Fox and Friends":



The brand debuted its first segment on "Fox and Friends" July 9, and Pita Pit received more franchise applications last month than it had in any month since Pita Pit USA was incorporated in 2005, Riggs said. Originally launched in Canada, Pita Pit first opened in the United States in Syracuse, N.Y., and now has locations in 38 states.

"The applications are coming from all over the place," Riggs said, "with the exception of out west, because Fox doesn't tape delay the show, meaning it's coming on at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. But east of the Mississippi is getting most of the response, and that's great because we're trying to develop more in college locations out there.

"In a lot of Western states, there are a couple of major universities, but out east, especially in the Northeast, there are hundreds of towns which would benefit from having a Pita Pit," he said.

Riggs said the return on investment is going a long way in terms of public relations and awareness, especially since the appearance on the morning show for eight weeks doesn't cost the brand anything other than building the pop-up Pita Pit set and flying staff to New York from Coeur d'Alene. Many of the chain's suppliers were happy to help defray costs to participate in the exposure, he said.

"Our vendor partners are so excited for us, so we got a lot of people bringing in support from different directions, which mitigated costs for production," Riggs said. "Doing it this many weeks in a row is definitely beneficial. It's a lot harder physically on us, but to repeatedly display the brand and give out pitas — with little things like that, you really get to drive your message home with full force."

Riggs said he had to be on his toes when on camera for a short time with the Fox show's host, whose banter doesn't always get down to business.

"We set up some talking points that we'd like to cover with him, but we rarely do," he said. "Everything is pretty frenetic, which isn't a bad thing. But you have to be ready for it. It's important to show that we're a casual, friendly brand, not just a bunch of pitch men."

Pita Pit's marketing firm, No Limit Media Consulting, worked out a similar stint on "Fox and Friends" earlier this year for Huddle House. Chief executive Nick Powills said that even if Pita Pit never awarded a franchise from the experience, it still would have been worth it for the "Fox and Friends" program's average daily viewership of 1.3 million people. But the brand only needs one franchise sale to recoup its investment, and it'll probably get it, he added.

"Pita Pit has no locations in New York City, and this will give it a location every Friday," Powills said. "We get the message out there that it's developing its system even in this economy, and the franchise interest will come in. Sell one franchise, and it covers everything. The goal was, how could we impact Pita Pit's franchising positively, either on the lead generation side or the due diligence side."

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