



Smokin' Oak Wood Fired Pizza

4 Ways to Create a Pizza Box That Rocks!

The chains are getting creative when it comes to their most-used food containers—the humble pizza box—and independents should follow suit.

- Some major chains are using their pizza boxes in outside-the-box ways to build their brand and stand out from the competition.
- For Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza, the pizza box has become the company's primary marketing vehicle as more guests choose delivery and takeout instead of dining in.

Pizza boxes may perform as mere cardboard carriers for a pizzaiolo's most prized creations, but today's enterprising brands are using them for more than just holding pies. "Pizza boxes are a customer's No. 1 touchpoint with your brand—everyone gets one!" says Mac Malchow, director of marketing for **Toppers Pizza**, based in Whitewater, Wisconsin, with 70 locations. "So make sure the messaging you have on there is a good representation of your brand and shows what differentiates you from your competition. Don't be afraid to get fun with them—customers love a unique pizza box!"

Others believe a standout box is crucial in today's delivery-dominated landscape, since diners may be interacting very little with your business in-person. "I truly believe the pizza box is an extension of the brand, and that's become more important in the last couple of years, as the number of guests eating outside the restaurant increased with COVID-19," notes Matt Mongoven, CEO and co-founder of the five-location **Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza**, based in St. Petersburg, Florida. "Our third-party delivery, curbside pickup and takeout jumped by 25% to 30%. Therefore, the pizza box is our main marketing vehicle for the guest, and we want it to reflect, as much as possible, the fun experience that guest would receive in-store."

Here's how four brands are using pizza boxes in outside-the-box ways.



Idea No. 1: Boxes as Brand Extension

Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza

At Smokin' Oak, pizza boxes perform multiple duties: by adding fun to mealtimes, drawing attention to upcoming promos and the in-store experience, and engaging customers through contests and social media. For example, fun slogans and themes populate the pizza boxes, like printing on the bottom that says, "Whoops, your pizza is upside-down!" with a smiley face. The brand's website is also printed on the boxes, which are made from recycled materials, while stickers advertise upcoming pizzeria promotions, such as Valentine's Day meal deals.

Guests also love the annual Pizza Box Art Contest, which Smokin' Oak hosts every year in April. "We bring in blank boxes, then ask our guests to decorate them to represent Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza," Mongoven says. "We give our guests a week to decorate their boxes, and then we put them on Facebook and give the public 24 hours to

choose their favorite design. The winner wins free pizza for a month. The community and the teams at the restaurants always have a lot of fun with them.”



Idea No. 2: Sustainable COVID-Era Care Packages

Oath Pizza

During the pandemic, **Oath Pizza** pivoted to create new revenue streams and launched Oath Craft Pizza Care Packages, now called Pizza Party Packs and sold on Goldbelly. “We ship our premade signature craft pizzas to households and businesses all over the country—it’s like a meal kit, without the prep or the mess for a crazy-easy pizza night,” says Merissa Zaltzberg, manager, brand and production, for Boston-based Oath Pizza, with 30 locations. “We had never created something like this, but we knew it was essential to make our messaging stand out and make the design aesthetically pleasing to ignite social sharing. The other important part was to ensure the box would hold up while shipping so customers could easily reuse or recycle it.”

Thus, Oath also installed in the boxes a completely compostable liner, made by Green Cell Foam, that melts under water in the sink (versus Styrofoam, which never degrades). “It’s always a win for us if it fuels our vision to use the popularity of pizza to make a lasting, positive impact on the earth,” Zaltzberg says.

In addition, because Oath’s signature personal pizza is a unique 11”, the company sought out packaging that fit perfectly. “We created a proprietary box by taking an inch off the height, width and depth of a generic 12” pizza box, which allowed us to use less overall material and reduced our costs,” Zaltzberg adds. “And with a perforated edge, it’s easy to tear off the top and keep out the parts of the pizza box that are no longer recyclable from any pizza residue. We created a smaller pizza box in the same way, which packages other offerings, like half personal pizzas, kids pizzas and breadsticks. The product-to-packaging ratio is always purposeful, and the packaging is utilized across as many products as possible to cut down on waste.”



Idea No. 3: Tantalizing Tie-Ins

Mountain Mike's Pizza

Boxes at the 249-location **Mountain Mike's Pizza**, headquartered in Newport Beach, California, are used as vehicles to engage with guests via fun, seasonally appropriate tie-ins. For example, when Valentine's Day approaches, the brand sends along its heart-shaped pizzas in "love-themed" boxes, while football season finds the boxes decked out

with game-day designs proclaiming the brand's status as the official pizza of the San Francisco 49ers.

“One of our most important guest-facing assets are our branded pizza boxes—they’re critical to continuing the story of our brand, no matter how the guest first connects with us (social media, website, TV, app, etc.),” notes Rosemary Doody, director of marketing at Mountain Mike’s Pizza. “Our pizza boxes carry not only our most treasured items—our pizzas—but also help create an important emotional connection with our guests. When we, as a brand, can engage with guests over events like 49ers football or our beloved heart-shaped pizza campaign, we’re able to contribute to an experience that’s memorable and meaningful.”

The brand notes an uptick in engagement across social media each time its 49ers pizza boxes are used, Doody says. “Likewise for heart-shaped pizza,” Doody adds. “Our guests share the love throughout the full month of February every time we run this campaign.” The takeaway: Comb your calendar for the most important days in your community, and design boxes around those events!



Idea No. 4: Award-Winning, Rotating Designs

Toppers Pizza

Toppers Pizza sports multiple designs for its pizza boxes, all in rotation at the same time to give customers variety each time they order. After working with creative partners Darling Brand Makery to custom-design each box, the results turned out so well that Toppers recently won Best in Show at the St. Louis Regional American Advertising Federation Awards. Furthermore, the company has designed its boxes to be more sustainable and save costs—reducing the amount of cardboard in its boxes in recent years by 20%. “They’re measured down to the centimeter on what we need to keep our products hot and fresh while being responsible to the environment and franchisees’ pocketbooks,” Malchow says.

The boxes are designed to benefit the brand in other ways, too. “We’ve incorporated QR codes for easy-access applications for hiring, URLs for our franchising website, and

even short-code SMS numbers to join our e-clubs quickly,” Malchow adds. “People are eating and reading, so why not give them easy access and exposure to other parts of the company?”

QR Codes Cheat Sheet

QR codes made a big comeback in the pandemic, and they can also be used on pizza boxes to encourage customers to interact further with your business. “Customers can scan QR codes to look at recipes, watch videos (like a message from the founder or showing how ingredients are sourced), view recycling instructions or leave reviews online,” explains Jon Stern, co-founder of [Ringpin](#) in San Diego, which has worked with Toronto-based [Pizza Nova](#) to engage with customers using QR codes. “Then the pizzeria gets all of the customer engagement analytics as well. What’s nice is that you can print large quantities of the boxes, but the QR codes are dynamic, so you can change what people see when they scan over time, and you can test different experiences and offers.”

Stern offers these top tips for using QR codes on pizza boxes:

- Make them effective by putting a call to action next to the code. It should be at least as large as the QR and give the customer a good reason or incentive to scan.
- White-label the URL so customers know it’s going to a trusted website versus some random link shortener.
- Avoid printing codes that don’t have a strong contrast against what they are printed on—make sure they stand out!