

Constant creativity ensures growth

At 140 diners ago, it started as a single restaurant Sheikh Zayed Road near Deira. It now has a common name for the first interchange on Jafza Road - with 14 members. Dubai-based unit was wanted to bring fresh fish to diners 'to fulfil their dreams of opening the first Japanese restaurant in the UAE. Thus, the year 2000 saw the start of Sumo Sushi & Bento.

The first decade, we saw slow growth. We had three units: Dubai Media City came up in 2004, Town Centre followed in 2006, while Jumeirah Lakes Towers came up much later, recalls Julianne Holt, CEO, Sumo Sushi & Bento, during a conversation at the show.

With the launch of Sumo Sushi & Bento mobile app in 2018, we have seen a nominal increase in customer loyalty. It now has a 50% active user rate.

Using cater a big in Sumo Sushi now strategy by the Sumo 100 units used to start multi units - like a Jumeirah and in City Walk or partnership of Group and relationship in shopping 3 Sushi & Bento in some great has exposed a 300+ of people. said has three units within the city several outlets. In Ajman 4 Sushi & Bento we long-term franchisees over ears. It has a long franchise chain with

three units there. But, according to Holt-Kalilawa, it doesn't cause any clash of interest, because each franchisee has a specific market to deal.

"It allows the brand to expand more while maintaining capital investment. We can rely on our franchise partner's expertise and capital. Of course, there are some challenges, as every partner comes with their mindset and expectations from the partnership. If these expectations aren't aligned, it can hurt the brand," she observes. "But we have been fortunate to have good relationships with our franchise partners in the UAE and beyond."

Recently, this UAE-based brand has announced expansion into India. Along with India-based franchise co-ownership, FreshGlobal



Julianne Holt-Kalilawa

as its strategic franchise partner Sumo Sushi & Bento plans to open 30 new outlets across major cities in India within the next four years. "The first Sumo Sushi & Bento restaurant is scheduled to open in India by January 2020. Moreover, we also have plans to enter the US and Canada," Holt-Kalilawa reveals.

A journey that started with a dream

"Back in 2000, affordable Japanese food wasn't that well known in the UAE and was only available in high-end hotels," says Holt-Kalilawa. "That's when we started Sumo Sushi & Bento. It was quite difficult to create consumer resonance.

People would come in and say they don't want Chinese food and we would say that's great because we serve Japanese food. We had to build awareness from scratch not only for Sumo Sushi & Bento but educate consumers about Japanese food generally."

"We used to see a lot of Western expatriates, especially Russians, visiting us. They liked sushi and understood our value proposition," she adds. "Gradually, over time, we started seeing more and more people gravitating towards Sumo Sushi & Bento. They appreciated our friendly ambience and high-quality food that wasn't too expensive."

Urban, not authentic

At this point, Holt-Kalilawa clarifies that Sumo Sushi & Bento was built around the core idea of being this friendly space that serves Japanese food with an urban twist. "We have never claimed to be an authentic Japanese restaurant, but a friendly, affordable and casual eatery that's highly experimental. We are one of the few restaurants that can bring out new hot and cold dishes every month."

Up close and personal

Being ahead of the curve: It requires continuous hard work, every single day, while listening to what our customers want. Sometimes operators can get into a comfort zone, which is dangerous because complacency is a stumbling block in that desire to remain ahead of the curve.

Getting into the right locations: To select the right locations, we look at the retail profile, conduct specific development market study to measure traffic patterns. Importantly, we evaluate placement within a particular property.

Setting up a central kitchen: We have looked at a lot of data to evaluate setting up a central kitchen, especially outside the GCC. Several third party aggregators are coming in and setting up similar operations. In fact, our JT unit acts as a commissary to our own units.



Sumo Sushi & Bento, Town Centre, Dubai

Sumo Sushi & Bento boasts a high rate of repeat customers who must be given reasons to come back and try something new every time. At the same time, the brand keeps a close eye on what customers generally like, adding such items on the menu regularly.

Investing in people and processes

Such constant menu refreshment requires creativity. "And creativity is one of our core values," Holt-Kalilawa avers. "It is even more crucial in a highly competitive market like the UAE where every other day a new restaurant comes up in this market. Sumo Sushi &

Bento has built a reputation of being that constant comfort place."

"Since the launch of our mobile app in 2018, we have seen a phenomenal increase in customer loyalty. We now have a 50% active user rate. We won the Loyalty 360 Award in the US for our customer loyalty strategy, especially with the app," she shares. "The app is extremely engaging while being mouthful of our brandising users with promotional messages. We engage with our customer smartly, wherein answering trivia questions can earn them instant rewards. We have a customer experience coordinator solely dedicated to managing customer relationship on the app."

"Further, at the backend, we have built a system to operate our franchise model. In simple terms, we

have built an intranet that holds our online franchise manuals and training videos. All the recipes are available online with information on calorie count, allergen notification and so on. We started this project two years ago, even before the Dubai Municipality's ruling on the calorie count. We also have a feature called 'Feedback Manager' that aggregates customer feedback across online and offline platforms," Holt-Kalilawa elaborates. "Over the years, alongside building our brand presence, we have heavily invested in our processes and people. We have some incredible stories of career progress. One of our dish-washers went on to become the restaurant manager and our chief stock-keepers and technology officer started as a waiter in 2004. These are massive testimonials," she stresses. ■

