

Faced with a labor crunch, restaurants sweeten benefits

By KAREN ROBINSON-JACOBS
The Dallas Morning News

DALLAS — Get a job flipping burgers, and your new boss might offer insurance for Fido.

Or if you sign on to wait tables, you may tap your employer for funds to offset adoption costs.

The nation's labor-intensive restaurant industry — with its notoriously high turnover rate — is caught in a labor crunch. Restaurant outlets are expanding faster than the pool of workers, and potential workers are seeking jobs in other industries as the recovery picks up steam.

In response, restaurateurs are offering the entrepreneurial equivalent of candy and flowers. They're beefing up benefits packages — with cash and intangibles — in a bid to lure new workers and keep others from jumping ship.

"You see restaurateurs who, as the competition for employees

heats up, will strengthen their portfolio of recruitment and retention tools," said Hudson Riehle, the National Restaurant Association's senior vice president for research and information services.

"If you look at ... the whole list of benefits, you can see the increased emphasis on 401(k) plans, educational assistance and transportation assistance plans."

While most restaurant companies have had some benefits packages all along, industry officials said they are putting renewed attention now on sweetening the pot.

Restaurateurs said they began to notice the labor crunch over the past 12 to 18 months. Riehle said this is developing into "the most challenging market since the late 1990s," when the industry experienced a major growth spurt.

Experts shy away from the term "worker shortage." But they

admit that restaurateurs are working harder to fill empty slots, some turnover rates are higher and some jobs stay vacant longer.

The fast-food segment, where wages and benefits are often lower, is being particularly squeezed, as fewer 16-to-19-year-olds join the work force.

"Two years ago, (restaurant managers) ... could hang a sign out front and staff up quickly," said Linda Norton-Wendt, vice president of Taco Bueno Restaurants LP, based in Carrollton, Texas.

"We're certainly having to work a lot harder now. The time to fill positions is starting to stretch out a little."

Continued growth only adds to the need.

The industry — the nation's largest private-sector employer — is big and getting bigger, as Americans increasingly eschew their own home cooking for the eatery up the street.

FOCUS, from 1B

Healthcare for 12 years. He serves on the Kentucky Public Health Associations Board of Directors and is the treasurer of the Kentucky Health Departments Association.

Other March of Dimes State Board of Directors members include Pearl Taylor, Romanza Johnson and Beverly Siegrist, all of Warren County.

Camping World will be hosting a "Ticket to Tailgate" scratch-and-win game Monday through Oct. 2. Customers are invited to visit any Camping World store during the given time frame to pick up scratch-and-win cards for a chance to win a trip for two to a college or professional football game of their choice. One grand prize winner

will be revealed among all stores, with hundreds of additional prizes also up for grabs.

Sprint will hold an open house at its new location at Buckhead Square at 4 p.m. Aug. 26. Refreshments will be served from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

The new store is at 760 Campbell Lane Suite 105, Buckhead Square. To attend, contact Allison Murphy by Friday at amurphy@ubiquitelpcs.com or (812) 475-1111 Ext. 1014

Events by Design will hold its 2005 Fall Bridal Show, Winter Wonderland Spectacular on Saturday at the Sloan Convention Center in Bowling Green. Brides will be admitted free; tickets for other

guests will be sold at the door for \$5 per person, with show hours from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Historic Preservation Board will hold the following workshop Sept. 6:

Financial Incentives for Rehab at the L&N Depot at 401 Kentucky St. The workshop will be at noon. There is no charge and no registration. Bring your lunch and learn more about the different financial incentives available for rehabilitation of residential and commercial properties in Bowling Green and Warren County.

For business tips, announcements or suggestions, call Raed G. Batah 783-3246 or e-mail at rbatah@bgdailynews.com.

WAFFLE, from 1B

Waffle House executives insist they've been sued only because they're a big company and they're quick to point out that the restaurant was among the first eateries to integrate after its founding in 1950s Atlanta.

"We serve all races," said co-founder Joe Rogers. "We're just a target. We're not guilty and never have been."

Waffle House started in September 1955 after Rogers, then a regional manager for a now-defunct diner chain out of Memphis, Tenn., walked up to a real estate agent who lived two doors down and proposed a partnership.

Rogers knew fast-food shops like McDonald's were just starting and he had an idea for an in-between, a sit-down restaurant that rivaled the speed of drive-ins.

"He said, 'You build a restaurant and I'll show you how to run it,'" recalled Tom Forkner, Waffle House's other founder.

The two built a restaurant in Avondale Estates, an east Atlanta suburb, and painted it yellow to catch the eye of motorists. It was Forkner who proposed naming the restaurant for the biggest money-maker on its 16-item menu: the waffle.

"It was the highest profit item you could do, so I said, 'Call it Waffle House and encourage people to eat waffles.'"

The name also made it clear the restaurant was different from carry-out stands. "You can't carry out waffles," Rogers said. "They get pretty flimsy. So we thought, 'Waffle House'll work.'"

The biggest problem initially was letting customers know that they also served burgers and T-bones for lunch and dinner. And people could get the full menu any time — a patty melt at 7 in the morning, or waffles and grits at 4 p.m.

When Waffle House opened, only one other restaurant in Atlanta was open 24 hours. Rogers convinced Forkner that in the modern world of interstate highways and television, people would like a restaurant that never closed, not even on Christmas. Forkner was skeptical until he visited his restaurant in the middle of the night.

"I thought everyone went to bed at night," Forkner said, "but I was wrong."

By 1960, there were four Waffle Houses around Atlanta. Inspired by the rapid expansion of McDonald's, profits were plunged into expansion, first to Tennessee, and then Florida and South Carolina. Waffle

House started franchising, and by the late 1960s there were 27. Then the formula picked up steam and never stopped.

Today, it's hard to drive far on an interstate across much of the country without seeing a yellow-and-black Waffle House sign. In some Atlanta suburbs, Waffle Houses are across the street from each other. Macon, Ga., has 10 Waffle House restaurants — and only nine McDonald's.

The company is privately held and doesn't disclose annual sales figures, but for an idea how well the little yellow diners are doing, consider this: Two percent of all eggs produced in the United States for food service end up on a Waffle House plate.

Back at the Atlanta Waffle House, movie manager Charles Kimbro has been eating the patty-melt plates with hash browns since he was a kid. "I started early with my parents," he said. His father still goes every day for morning coffee. "The food is fast and they're always friendly."

Nowhere is Waffle House's working-man vibe stronger than at its headquarters in Norcross, Ga. A plaque in the lobby says the whole building is dedicated to the "Poor Old Cash Customer Who Made It All Possible."

Forkner and Rogers no longer run the company (it's headed by Joe Rogers Jr.), but executives still are required to work holidays, including Christmas and New Year's. They figure that if waitresses have to show up on Thanksgiving, executives should, too.

"We're a family," Rogers said.

As for the future, Rogers and Forkner envision a lot more Waffle Houses where things stay the same. There are no plans to end the cash-only policy (credit cards would be too slow, Rogers said) or to change the menu. Except for salads and sandwich wraps, and more pictures for customers who don't speak English, it looks about the same as it did in 1955.

"We serve the basic foods, and the basic foods never change," Rogers said.

Maybe that's what has kept Waffle House going. The fact that a restaurant in Tallahassee, Fla., or Tupelo, Miss., will look the same, serve the same foods and somehow not feel like a fast-food chain.

"There's something about the intimacy of sitting at that counter and smelling all the grease and watching the short-order cook at the grill," Edge said. "It's a fascinating pageant. It's more than a place to eat, it's a place of fellowship."

SECRETS, from 1B

tion and additional encryption, and using Kismet, the same free, downloadable software Pickett used, was able to break into the network in less than two hours.

"Using inexpensive hardware and freely available tools, a typical Wi-Fi network can be easily cracked in a mere hour and a half ... if you are concerned about wireless security, you must use strong application-layer encryption and authentication," Flickenger wrote.

Rick Mitchell is CEO of Sirque Wireless Internet in Bowling Green. Mitchell works with a different kind of wireless technology than the kinds Pickett describes, but many of the technologies overlap when it comes to service and accessibility.

Mitchell markets Frequency

Hopping radio equipment from Alvarion. Frequency hopping was invented by Hedy Lamarr and is not the same modulation scheme used by Direct Sequence radios that are labeled WiFi.

"WiFi was created for ease of operation and simplicity, not for security," Mitchell said.

"I looked at both technologies when I set up my company. I felt like the frequency hopping technology was more secure and more survivable."

Mitchell and Pickett are colleagues, customers and even competitors. But Mitchell said Pickett was essentially on the mark when describing wireless accessibility.

Pickett said since inexpensive accessories have made wireless use so widespread, securing, especially business networks, is essential.

Pickett said in the end, the liability lies on the shoulders of the end user or business that implements the wireless.

"In the case of a publicly available WiFi spot, the liability is on the user of the WiFi spot, but the WiFi provider can take steps to not only inform their patrons, but relieve themselves of any liability," he said. "They can post a 'terms-of-use' policy with examples of risks, suggestions for safe usage, and a statement that the end user takes all the risks when using the network."

Richard Pickett at CSR Technologies can be reached at 746-0324, online at www.csrtechnologies.com or e-mail at richard.pickett@csrtechnologies.com

Building permits

WARREN COUNTY

Gary Hughes, 1911 Mosswood Drive, storage shed, \$350.

Tim Burden, 13797 Morgantown Road, residence remodel, \$5,000.

John Doty, 3850 Hunts Bend Road, carport, \$3,200.

Ben Cooper, Lot 21 Peachtree Downs, single-family residence, \$110,000.

Donald Duley, Lot 11 Windland, garage, \$10,000.

John King, 1650 Van Meter Road, addition, \$18,000.

Nelson Hill, 2132 Larmon Mill Road, pool, \$15,000.

John Eagles, 1391 Boyce Fairview, storage shed, \$2,000.

Crimson Construction, Lot 157 Springfield, single-family residence, \$120,000.

Barry Harris, 5940 Woodburn-Allen Springs Road, single-family residence, \$225,000.

Melinda Boards, 305 Easton Circle, addition, \$16,500.

Gemini Homes, Lot 141 Sutherland Farms, \$250,000.

Bennie Jones, 310 Greenview Way, swimming pool house, \$70,000.

Banks Crandell, Lot 112 North Ridge, single-family residence, \$55,000.

Banks Crandell, Lot 111 North Ridge, single-family residence, \$55,000.

Daniel Purdy, 3319 New Cut Road, single-family residence, \$120,000.

Victor Billhartz, 785 Shaker Mill Road, garage, \$12,000.

Greenwood Construction LLC, Lot 155 North Ridge, single-fam-

ily residence, \$80,000.

BOWLING GREEN

Donald Brooks, 631 Oak Grove Way, storage building, \$2,100.

Alenko, 16007 Crownridge Court, garage, \$400.

Habitat for Humanity, 208 W. 12th Ave., single-family residence, \$60,000.

Payday Advance/Anchor Sign Co., 760 Campbell Lane, Ste. 104, sign, \$3,451.

Four-C Excavation, 218 College St., demolition.

Four-C Excavation, 216 College St., demolition.

Four-C Excavation, 621 State St., demolition.

Bangkok Grocery Asian Food, 1701 U.S. 31-W By-Pass, sign, \$230.

Building on the Rock, 127 Old Mill Drive, single-family residence, \$90,000.

Poston Construction Inc., 1830 Destiny Lane (101-106), commercial building, \$436,000.

Poston Construction Inc., 1830 Destiny Lane (113-116), commercial building, \$291,000.

Almir Beslagic, 719 Park Hill St., building, \$500.

Burchett Construction, 1598 Shady Ridge Court, single-family residence, \$240,000.

Henson Homes LLC, 108 Moultrie Court, single-family residence, \$130,000.

Henson Homes LLC, 116 Moultrie Court, single-family residence, \$140,000.

Henson Homes LLC, 133 Moultrie Court, single-family residence, \$140,000.

First Baptist Church/WAKY Sign Company, 621 E. 12th Ave., sign.

Hyunda/WAKY Sign Company, 2200 Scottsville Road, sign, \$7,000.

National Corvette Museum, 350 Corvette Drive, tent.

Salute!



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