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Wendy's, McDonald's Beef Up Gift Cards

by Lisa Bertagnoli, Friday, Dec 1, 2006 5:00 AM ET

COUNT WENDY'S, MCDONALD'S, DENNY'S AND IHOP among the restaurant chains that have either added gift cards to their product lineup, or replaced paper gift certificates with electronic, reloadable cards.

The cards sell.

McDonald's added "Arch Cards" to its paper gift certificate program last year, and sold 4.5 million cards in December, a spokeswoman said. The chain is on track to handily beat that figure this December, in part because of "Writable Ronald" cards, introduced Nov. 30, that enable gift-card buyers to write a personal message on the cards.

Denny's cards, rolled out Sept. 5, "are doing great," said Alice Crowder, director of new products marketing for Spartanburg, S.C.-based Denny's.

Non-expiring gift cards, most of which are reloadable (Denny's is not), also act as portable marketing devices. The wallet-size pieces of plastic are emblazoned with the chain's name and frequently a menu item. IHOP has emblazoned its cards, rolled out for 2005's holiday season, with its Rooty Tooty Fresh n Fruity pancake offering, while Wendy's gift cards, rolled nationally Nov. 23, also feature menu items.

The cards also offer an operational benefit to chains. "Gift cards will give us better metrics...we can track everything from total sales to redemption," said Bob Bertini, a spokesman for Dublin, Ohio-based Wendy's. Bertini said Wendy's will accept paper gift certificates through 2007.

Wendy's launched the cards by giving away 80,000 \$1-value cards at airports across the country to passengers who showed a middle-seat boarding pass. The kickoff played off the current "Stuck in the Middle" ad campaign for Wendy's Double Melt Burgers. Through mid-December, customers will receive a \$1 gift card with the purchase of a Double Melt sandwich. Bertini said the chain expects to give out 8 million cards.

To promote the cards, chains are using everything from television commercials to in-store marketing materials. Denny's servers wear buttons listing reasons to buy the cards ("because Grandpa loves our pancakes," "because she's so hard to shop for").

At McDonald's, servers' name tags are shaped like Arch Cards; an acrylic display case, register toppers and tray liners also tout the cards. Glendale,

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Calif.-based IHOP promotes the cards with a 3- to 5-second tag at the end of commercials as well as with ceiling danglers in the stores.

Since gift cards are portable, cross-marketing opportunities abound.

McDonald's gift cards are sold at Safeway-owned supermarkets, and Denny's is exploring the option of selling its cards at drugstores and convenience stores. That way, "we'll be reintroducing ourselves to people who don't regularly visit us," Crowder said.

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