



Interview with Gus Karalekas – Owner, Sanford's Astoria

April 23, 2010



In January, I visited [Sanford's](#) in Astoria as part of my [93 Plates](#) project. The owner, Gus (above – His brother and co-owner Chris is below) was talking about some of the stuff that he was up to regarding the changes in restaurant marketing over time, and I wanted to hear more about it. I shot him some questions:



You, your brothers and cousins have been in the restaurant industry all your life. Your dad bought the business in 1975, and as you and your brother took over in the 90s, the restaurant has seen a lot of changes. What did trends you notice working with your father through the 80s?

The trends in the 80's were quantity vs quality, get it out, get it out big, get it out fast, and get it out cheap. The get it out fast is still relative today, as is the get it out cheap; especially in this economy. Now people want more quality-driven, health-conscious meals. The words organic, locally-sourced didn't come around until recently. The days of Liver Steak & Onions and Mama's meatloaf are over (almost). That said, people today want to eat healthy but also high-quality comfort food. We held true to our diner roots and kicked it up a notch. Upscale comfort food is what we serve, but you can't ignore the experimentation happening in the business right now – we have added a lot of innovative touches to the cuisine.

When did you guys implement customer feedback cards? How important has it been to your business?

We implemented comment cards the first day we opened after the renovation, and I have to tell you it has been an invaluable asset. Some of them are funny; others are crazy, but they provide us real information from the front lines, and have given us some great ideas. In this business, you need to *listen, listen, listen*. Listen to everyone from your dishwashers, busboys, waiters, customers, mailmen if you are going to be successful.

What was the last straw before the overhaul and new restaurant concept?

There really was no last straw. We were planning a renovation and had decided to totally re-invent the concept, when we got caught with our pants down and we had a fire in the kitchen of the old restaurant. That mad us kick it into high gear to make the move faster with less planning. We're very proud of the way it came out.

You're on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) – why? Have you seen any results from being on these sites?

Absolutely, we have over 3,000 people following us on Facebook. It's an invaluable resource. People often come in and say "I saw that on Facebook this morning at work, and I want it." It's happened more than once. All this from spending a half hour a day on the computer doing some marketing.

Have you gotten any suggestions from your customers through Twitter or Facebook?

Again..absolutely...we encourage customer feedback from all our online outlets...website..twitter...facebook etc....we get a lot of compliments...but what im really looking for as an owner...are the complaints...those are the people I want to tackle and make it up to them if they had a bad experience. That said, I also want to build an even better relationship with those that are complimenting us....get them in more...reward them..take care of them....BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP...that is the key in my opinion to any business..especially this one...so many operators today take for granted the relationship with the customer...it is the key to survival. I have all of it connected through my blackberry, so I know immediately when stuff happens.

What are your plans for your online presence moving forward?

Working on a Sanford's iPhone App, working with Yelp on marketing and [Seamless Web](#) (we are their biggest customer in Queens), as well as [OpenTable](#) (also one of their top five in Queens). I'm constantly working on updating the site, Facebook page. We're going to get text message ordering up and running soon. We're trying to focus on more personal marketing with our customers as much as possible.

Any other big plans in the works?

We're expanding to an outdoor space next door, considering a food truck ... of course, we've got a few more irons in the fire, but I'll keep those a secret for now. Stay tuned!