

Are Food Trucks Right for Your Brick-and-Mortar Brand?

A Consultant's Deep Dive Into Strategy, Risk, and Return

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Over the last decade, food trucks have shifted from fringe novelty to mainstream foodservice vehicles for both startups and established brands. Major chains, independent operators, hotels, airports, breweries, and even grocery retailers are embracing mobile kitchens as extensions of their core operations. But while the idea carries obvious appeal—mobility, lower startup costs, and fast brand exposure—the decision to launch a food truck is far more strategic than it first appears.

For brick-and-mortar restaurant brands, the question is not *"Should we get a food truck?"* but rather *"Does a food truck meaningfully advance our business goals?"* This article breaks down the opportunities, the operational realities, and the hard financial considerations every operator must weigh.

1. The Strategic Appeal of Food Trucks for Established Brands

✓ Brand Extension With Low Risk

A food truck lets an existing restaurant meet customers where they are—festivals, office parks, sporting events, breweries, concerts, corporate campuses, neighborhoods, and underserved trade areas.

It's a way to introduce your brand's flavors to entirely new audiences without betting millions on a new build-out.

✓ Market Testing Before Building

Thinking about opening a second or third unit?

A food truck can act as a rolling test kitchen, helping validate:

- Menu strength
- Price tolerance
- Neighborhood demand
- Brand recognition
- Labor availability
- Sales velocity patterns

This kind of real-world data is far more valuable than survey results or instinct.

✓ High-Impact Marketing Tool

A food truck is a literal moving billboard.

For many brands, especially fast casual and casual dining, the marketing impact alone can justify the investment when paired with digital advertising, QR codes, catering offers, and loyalty program integrations.

2. The Operational Challenges You Must Be Honest About

A food truck is not simply “a restaurant on wheels.” It is its own business model with distinct constraints that brick-and-mortar operators often underestimate.

✗ Limited Menu Capacity

Small spaces limit:

- Prep room
- Refrigeration
- Holding capacity
- Equipment footprint
- Staff movement

Your existing menu likely needs to be condensed and reengineered for speed and efficiency.

✗ Weather & Event Dependency

Rain, heat waves, wind, cancellations, and permit restrictions can wipe out revenue days. This volatility requires a financial model that can absorb unpredictability.

✗ Labor Realities

Food truck labor is different:

- Tight quarters
- Solo or two-person operations
- Higher physical stress
- Need for strong cross-training
- Dependence on a driver/manager who can handle both cooking and logistics

This is not plug-and-play with your existing restaurant staffing model.

✗ Maintenance and Hidden Costs

Beyond typical kitchen maintenance, trucks introduce:

- Engine repairs
- Generator failures
- Tires and brakes
- Wrap/paint maintenance
- Commissary fees
- Fire suppression inspections
- Parking/storage fees

Many operators underestimate these costs by 30–40% in year one.

3. The Financial Realities: Lower Startup Cost... but Not Low Cost

Startup Investment

A properly built food truck typically costs:

- \$120,000–\$220,000 for a professional-grade truck
- \$80,000–\$150,000 for a trailer
- \$250,000+ for high-volume or brand-integrated builds

These costs don't include permitting, storage, commissary kitchen requirements, or staffing.

Operating Economics

Successful trucks often hit:

- \$2,000–\$6,000 revenue per operating day
- 50–200 event days per year
- Food + labor cost targets similar to fast casual
- EBITDA margins from 10%–25% when managed effectively

However, the variance is enormous. A strong festival season can double projected revenue; a weak event calendar can sink a truck.

When the Financials Make Sense

A food truck model becomes compelling when:

- You plan to book 3–5 events/week
- You integrate catering and private events
- You use the truck to drive traffic to brick-and-mortar stores

- You leverage it as marketing and not purely as a revenue generator

4. Food Trucks as a Marketing, Catering, and Sales Engine

Many brick-and-mortar brands use food trucks strategically beyond day-to-day sales.

Corporate Catering

Food trucks can be hired by:

- Tech campuses
- Distribution centers
- Business parks
- Hospitals
- Manufacturing plants

This provides stable weekday revenue and predictable scheduling.

Brand Partnerships

Trucks can support:

- New store openings
- Seasonal promotions
- Retail brand collaborations
- Sports partnerships
- Municipal events

Community Engagement

A food truck builds goodwill in local communities and strengthens grassroots marketing—especially meaningful for family restaurants and regional chains.

5. When a Food Truck *Is Not* the Right Choice

A mobile extension may not be aligned with your brand if:

- Your menu doesn't translate to fast, compact execution
- Consistency is a challenge in your existing stores
- Labor availability is already strained
- Your leadership team lacks an operational champion for the project
- You expect it to perform like a full-service unit
- You need predictable year-round sales

In these cases, the truck becomes a distraction, not a growth engine.

6. A Decision Framework for Brick-and-Mortar Operators

Before committing, ask:

Strategic Fit

- Does a food truck help achieve a specific business goal?
- Does it strengthen your brand identity or dilute it?

Operational Readiness

- Can your menu be streamlined to 6–12 high-volume items?
- Do you have staff capable of running a mobile operation?

Financial Expectations

- Can your business tolerate seasonality?
- Are you budgeting for maintenance and event variability?

Marketing Integration

- Will you use the truck to drive loyalty, new store awareness, and catering sales?

If you cannot answer “yes” in most of these categories, slow down and reassess.

Conclusion: Food Trucks Are Powerful—But Only When Used Strategically

For brick-and-mortar brands, food trucks can serve as:

- A marketing vehicle
- A research and development lab
- A catering platform
- A new revenue stream
- A brand awareness engine
- A low-risk geographic expansion tool

But they are not a shortcut to easy profit.

Food trucks succeed when they are integrated into a larger brand strategy—not when they are treated as a side project. With the right planning, menu engineering, staffing approach, and financial modeling, a food truck can elevate a brand far beyond what four walls alone can deliver.

