Executive Briefs

The Invisible Acquisition Cost: What Platforms Don't Tell Your P&L

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-07-09 · Marketing & Growth

QUICK VERDICT

The verdict: the real cost of acquiring a diner through aggregators and paid ads is not the commission on the invoice —it's that commission plus the discount, the lost customer data, and the LTV that never returns to your restaurant. Consolidated into your P&L, a "profitable" app order usually destroys 8 to 15 points of contribution margin. The lever is not to switch off delivery: it's to repurchase the customer —turning the platform order into a direct, recurring diner whose amortized CAC drops to a fraction. That's the EBITDA platforms don't tell you about.

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I wrote this brief for the owner or director who reviews the P&L every month and waves off delivery commissions as "a necessary evil," without ever quantifying the full acquisition cost those commissions hide. It is not a case against platforms. It is a decision architecture for knowing what each new customer truly costs, and how to turn that spend into an asset (repurchase) instead of a perpetual rental of the diner.

Diego F. Parra and the Masterestaurant methodology treat acquisition cost as a unit-economics problem, not a marketing one. The right question isn't "how much commission am I paying?" but "what is that customer worth over 12 months, and what fraction of it am I giving away by not capturing the data or the repurchase?" This document draws that math, and the path to recover it.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	PLATFORM ACQUISITION (INVISIBLE CAC)	ACQUISITION + DIRECT REPURCHASE (MR METHOD)
Commission / cost per order	✕ 15%–30% of ticket per order on aggregators	✓ First-order commission + amortized CAC that falls with each repurchase
Marketing spend as % of sales	✕ Up to 10% for a new business (Toast, 2025)	✓ 3%–6% recommended for an established business (Toast, 2025)
Ownership of customer data	✕ Data stays on the platform; you don't own it	✓ Owned data: base for repurchase, loyalty and LTV
Spend per order (recurring vs first-time)	✕ First-time customer: baseline	✓ Recurring spends 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025)
Purchase frequency	✕ One-off order, no relationship	✓ Loyalty member buys 40%+ more often (Paytronix, 2024)
Loyalty member ticket	✕ Walk-in customer: baseline	✓ Member spends 38% more per visit (Paytronix, 2025)
Effect on contribution margin	✕ Loses 8–15 pts per platform order	✓ Recovers margin as CAC is amortized

1. What does a new guest from an aggregator really cost you?

Add the commission, the discount spent to win the order, the customer data you gave up and the LTV that never comes back: that is the real bill for a guest from an aggregator, not the percentage on your P&L.

Diego F. Parra works that math as a unit-economics problem, never a marketing one. A platform charging 25% commission, plus a 20% discount to win the order, has already taken close to 45% of the value before food cost (28% to 35%, per the National Restaurant Association) even enters the picture. And if misread cash flow is, per Inc., the leading cause of small-business closures, then that "profitable" order ends up subtracting contribution margin the moment you consolidate it. The right comparison is never commission versus ticket: it's CAC versus LTV over 12 months. The aggregator keeps the email, the phone number and the order history; you keep the shrinkage, and on the next order you pay the full CAC again, because without the customer's data every new guest is a rental, not a purchase, never amortized through repurchase.

2. Why without the customer's data every order is a rental, not a purchase

That difference moves the whole economics, because existing customers spend on average 67% more per order than new ones (Restroworks, 2025). If you can't re-contact the guest, that extra 67% lands in the platform's account next cycle. The Masterestaurant methodology forces the question of what that customer is worth over 12 months, and what fraction of it you're giving away by not capturing the data or the repurchase. A 15 USD CAC without repurchase is a 15 USD CAC per order, forever; with repurchase, it dilutes across visits. Commission measures one loose order; LTV measures a full relationship, and confusing the two is the shortcut that empties the margin. A recurring customer spends 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025), and if they're also a loyalty member they buy more often: 81% of U.S. loyalty members return more frequently than non-members (Paytronix, 2024). Those same members visit 40% or more times than someone not enrolled (Paytronix, 2024) and spend 38% more per visit than a walk-in (Paytronix, 2025).

3. The correct unit economics: CAC versus LTV, not commission versus ticket

Looking only at the 25% commission on a ticket ignores that this same guest, captured and retained, would generate twice the visits (LoyaltyPass, 2026). Optimizing the commission while surrendering the whole relationship: that's the miscalculation quietly propping up much of the sector. To "win" an order in the app, many operators give away 2-for-1 deals, free delivery or up to 30% off, and that ceded margin is pure CAC, as real as paying for advertising, even though it never shows up on the P&L's commission line. Add that discount to a typical 25% commission and acquiring that guest can eat more than half the ticket before food cost even enters, which the National Restaurant Association sets between 28% and 35%. The sector confirms it on the marketing side: a new restaurant can spend up to 10% of sales, an established one between 3% and 6% (Toast, 2025).

4. The promotional discount: the acquisition cost that never shows in the commission

The problem isn't spending. It's spending without capturing the asset, because 47% of adults order takeout every week (National Restaurant Association, 2025), and that volume only justifies the outlay if it turns the app guest into your own recurring customer. A QR code on the packaging that leads to your own channel, paired with an incentive for the second order, is the concrete tactic that turns delivery spend into an asset: it works because more than 89 million Americans scanned a QR code in 2025 (QR Code, 2025). The next goal is migrating that guest into a loyalty program, where members visit 40% or more often (Paytronix, 2024) and spend 38% more per visit (Paytronix, 2025). Diego F. Parra presses one nuance: the first aggregator purchase can lose margin if you treat it as an isolated transaction rather than an acquisition investment. In a delivery market that moved 32.42 billion dollars in GMV across Latin America in 2025 (Grand View Research), whoever captures the data stops renting guests and starts buying them once.

5. Consolidating CAC in the P&L: the calculation almost nobody does

Almost no owner runs this calculation: pooling into a single line the commission, the discount, your own delivery cost if you carry one, and the value of the data you surrendered, then weighing it against the guest's real LTV. Most look at delivery commissions as "a necessary evil" without quantifying any of it. With food cost at 28% to 35% (National Restaurant Association) and commissions of 25% to 30%, an order can close at negative contribution margin if a discount piled on top. The Masterestaurant discipline here is pure unit economics, leaning on the fact that a repeat customer spends 67% more (Restroworks, 2025): if a captured guest's 12-month LTV comfortably clears the consolidated CAC, the spend was a purchase; if you never capture it, it was perpetual rental. Inc. names misread cash flow the number-one reason small businesses close; this calculation is exactly what keeps you off that list.

6. Social discovery is no longer optional to amortize CAC

67% of Gen Z decides where to eat based on what they see on social media, and 41% use TikTok to search for a restaurant (TouchBistro and Restroworks, 2025): that social discovery decides, before anything else, whether the customer finds you cheap or the aggregator finds them expensive. That owned channel lowers acquisition cost against the platform's 25% commission, but only counts if you measure it inside the same P&L. Influencer-marketing spend in the U.S. hit 10.52 billion dollars in 2025, up 23.7% (Socially Powerful), averaging 202 dollars per collaboration (Collabstr, 2025): cheaper than ceding LTV to a platform indefinitely. A Google listing with more than 100 photos gets 520% more calls (Restroworks, 2025). Mastering discovery and repurchase together turns CAC into an amortizable investment, not a guest rental. Visible commission is just the tip of the cost: underneath sits the discount, the lost customer data and the ceded LTV, and that sum is what erases the margin on an order that looked profitable on the surface.

7. Why platform CAC is systemic entropy

A customer who arrives without leaving their data behaves like a rental, not a purchase: the next order bills the full CAC again instead of diluting it through repurchase. Comparing commission against ticket hides the cost; comparing CAC against LTV reveals it, and there a recurring customer who spends 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025) changes the whole equation.

POINT BY POINT

Platform acquisition vs. direct repurchase: verdict by criterion

DECISION UNIT

A · PLATFORM ACQUISITION (INVISIBLE CAC)

Commission vs. order ticket

B · MASTERESTAURANT CAC vs. 12-month diner LTV

Verdict: Correct unit economics compares CAC against LTV; measuring commission against ticket hides the real cost.

CUSTOMER OWNERSHIP

A · PLATFORM ACQUISITION (INVISIBLE CAC)

Data stays on the platform

B · MASTERESTAURANT Owned data for repurchase and loyalty

Verdict: Without the data you rent the diner; with the data you buy them once and amortize the CAC.

EFFECT ON CONTRIBUTION MARGIN

A · PLATFORM ACQUISITION (INVISIBLE CAC)

Loses 8–15 pts per app order

B · MASTERESTAURANT Recovers margin with each direct repurchase

Verdict: The platform brings the first order; the repurchase system keeps the margin from the second onward.

GROWTH LEVER

A · PLATFORM ACQUISITION (INVISIBLE CAC)

More paid-ad spend

B · MASTERESTAURANT Retention: recurring spends 67% more (Restroworks, 2025)

Verdict: Growing via repurchase amortizes CAC; growing only via paid acquisition multiplies it.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

What you see on the invoice VISIBLE COST

- ✗ The aggregator commission (15%–30%) as a single P&L line.
- ✗ The paid-ad budget as "visibility investment".
- ✗ The promotional discount to "activate" the platform.

What platforms don't tell you MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ The diner LTV that stays in the app and never returns direct.
- ✓ The customer data you don't own and can't reactivate.
- ✓ The repurchase an owned customer generates at near-zero CAC.

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THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

Scorecard: the math your P&L doesn't show

10%

Marketing spend as % of sales for a new restaurant (ceiling)

6%

Recommended marketing spend for an established business (top of 3%–6% range)

67%

More spend per order from recurring vs first-time customer

40%+

Higher visit frequency of loyalty members vs non-members

38%

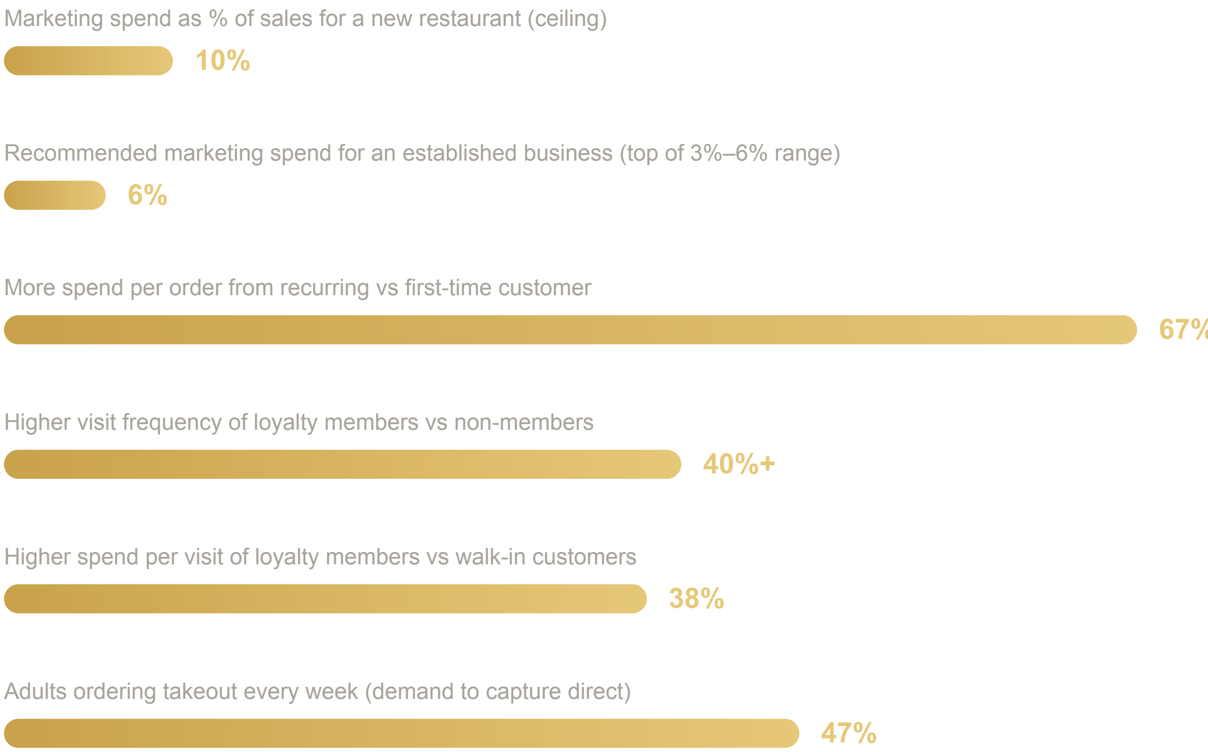
Higher spend per visit of loyalty members vs walk-in customers

47%

Adults ordering takeout every week (demand to capture direct)

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: Toast 2025 · Restroworks 2025 · Paytronix 2024 · Paytronix 2025 · National Restaurant Association 2025

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

“The mistake I see over and over: the owner celebrates 300 monthly app orders and hasn't calculated that each one costs 22% commission plus a 10% discount to "show up". We rebuilt his P&L: platform delivery ran at 6% contribution margin against 34% in the dining room. We didn't switch off the app —we set up data capture in the packaging and a repurchase sequence over WhatsApp. In four months, 41% of those diners had ordered at least once through a direct channel. The amortized CAC of that segment fell below a third and delivery margin rose to 21 points. The platform still brought the first order; we kept the second, the third and the LTV.”

— Diego F. Parra, Masterestaurant consultant

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

Strategic roadmap: recover the invisible CAC in 3 phases

1 **Phase 1 — Operational due diligence: consolidate the real CAC (weeks 1–3)**
Deliverable: an acquisition P&L that separates each channel (aggregator, paid ads, organic, direct) and computes CAC = commission + discount + campaign cost per new customer, against the real contribution margin of each channel. Success metric: identify the % of orders running below dining-room margin (platform delivery typically runs 8–15 pts lower). With marketing up to 10% of sales for new businesses (Toast, 2025), this line usually goes un-audited.

2 **Phase 2 — Data-capture architecture (weeks 3–8)**
Deliverable: a system to turn the platform order into owned data —QR on packaging, first direct-repurchase incentive, loyalty enrollment. With over 89 million Americans scanning a QR code in 2025 (QR Code, 2025), friction is minimal. Success metric: capture the data of ≥35% of platform orders within 8 weeks, the base to reactivate the 47% of adults who order takeout weekly (NRA, 2025).

3 **Phase 3 — Repurchase engine and CAC amortization (weeks 8–16)**
Deliverable: a direct-repurchase sequence (WhatsApp, email, loyalty) that moves the diner from the expensive channel to the owned one. Success metric: ≥30% of captured customers with at least one direct repurchase and amortized CAC below a third of the initial figure. It leverages that recurring customers spend 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025) and loyalty members visit 40%+ more often (Paytronix, 2024): that's where EBITDA is rebuilt.

FAQ

Decision-maker FAQ

What is the real cost of acquiring a customer through a delivery platform?

It's not just the 15% to 30% commission on the ticket: the real cost adds the promotional discount, the lost customer data and the LTV that stays in the app. Consolidated into your P&L, a platform order usually runs 8 to 15 contribution-margin points below the dining room.

Should I switch off aggregator delivery to protect margin?

No. The platform remains a valid channel for the first order and visibility. The lever is to repurchase the customer: capture their data and move them to a direct channel, where a recurring customer spends 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025) and the amortized CAC drops to a fraction.

How much should a restaurant spend on marketing and acquisition?

A new business can reach up to 10% of sales; an established one, between 3% and 6% (Toast, 2025). What matters is not the percentage but the destination: spend that builds owned data and repurchase amortizes, while spend that only rents the diner on the platform repeats with every order.

How do I quantify the return of recovering the invisible CAC?

Compare CAC against LTV by channel, not commission against ticket. A customer converted to direct with loyalty visits 40%+ more often (Paytronix, 2024) and spends 38% more per visit (Paytronix, 2025): that differential, amortized over the initial CAC, is the EBITDA platforms don't tell you about.

DATA & SOURCES

Sector data 2026 (official sources)

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Redes sociales útiles para descubrir nuevos alimentos	**74% de los comensales (2025)**	National Restaurant Association SOI 2025 (vía Tablein)
Efecto de reseñas Yelp en ingresos	**Subir 1 estrella en Yelp aumenta los ingresos 5-9% (restaurantes independientes)**	Harvard Business School (Michael Luca) 2016
Lectura de reseñas antes de elegir restaurante	**71% lee reseñas en Google antes de decidir dónde comer (2024)**	BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2024
ROI del email marketing	**$36 de retorno por cada $1 invertido en email (2024)**	Litmus 2024
ROI del email según DMA	**$42.24 de retorno por cada $1 en email (2024)**	DMA (Data & Marketing Association) 2024
Influencia de TikTok en visitas	**58% visitó un restaurante tras verlo en TikTok, frente al 38% en 2022**	MGH Survey 2024