


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

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

MASTERRESTAURANT®

Executive Brief


El Costo de Adquisición Invisible: Lo que las Plataformas No le Cuentan a su P&L

Método probado en +8.400 restaurantes · 43 países

masterrestaurant.com

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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This brief is written for the owner or director who reads the P&L each month and sees delivery commissions as "a necessary evil" without quantifying the full acquisition cost they hide. It is not a case against platforms: it's a decision architecture to know 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 Masterrestaurant methodology treat acquisition cost as a unit-economics problem, not a marketing one. The right question is not "how much commission do I pay?" 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?

The real cost of acquiring a guest through an aggregator is not the commission on your invoice: it is the sum of that commission, the promotional discount, the loss of the customer's data, and the LTV that never returns.

Diego F. Parra treats this as a unit economics problem, not a marketing one. When a platform charges 25% commission on a ticket, plus a 20% discount to win the order, you have already given away nearly 45% of the value before touching food cost, which the National Restaurant Association places between 28% and 35%. Add that cash flow is the leading cause of small-business closure (Inc.), and the "profitable" order in the app usually destroys contribution margin once you consolidate it in the P&L. The right calculation is not commission versus ticket; it is CAC versus LTV over 12 months. Without ownership of the customer's data, every new guest is a rental, not a purchase: you pay the full CAC again on the next order instead of amortizing it with the repeat visit.

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

The aggregator keeps the email, the phone, and the history; you keep the shrinkage. That detail changes the economics entirely, because existing customers spend on average 67% more per order than new ones (Restroworks, 2025). If you cannot re-contact the guest, the platform captures that extra 67% in the next cycle. The Masterrestaurant methodology forces the question of what that customer is worth over 12 months and what fraction of that value you are giving away by not capturing the data or the repeat purchase. A CAC of 15 USD without repeat business is a CAC of 15 USD per order, forever; with repeat business, it dilutes across visits. The correct unit economics compares CAC against LTV, never commission against ticket. Commission measures one order; LTV measures a relationship. A recurring customer who spends 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025) and, if a loyalty member, buys more often —81% of U.S.

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

loyalty members buy more frequently than non-members (Paytronix, 2024)— changes the equation entirely. Loyalty program members visit 40% or more often than non-members (Paytronix, 2024) and spend 38% more per visit than walk-in customers (Paytronix, 2025). When you look only at the 25% commission on a ticket, you ignore that this same guest, captured and retained, would generate twice the visits (LoyaltyPass, 2026). The mistake I see again and again: optimizing the order's commission while surrendering the entire relationship. The promotional discount is the second acquisition cost that never appears on the commission line of the P&L. To "win" an order in the app, many operators offer 2-for-1, free delivery, or 30% off; that sacrificed margin is pure CAC, as real as paying for advertising. Added to a typical 25% commission, acquiring that guest can consume more than half the ticket before food cost, which the National Restaurant Association sets at 28%–35%.

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

The sector confirms it in marketing: a new restaurant spends up to 10% of sales on marketing and an established one between 3% and 6% (Toast, 2025). The problem is not spending; it is spending without capturing the asset. 47% of adults order takeout every week (National Restaurant Association, 2025): that volume justifies the spend only if it converts the app guest into your own recurring customer. Delivery spend becomes an asset when every platform order triggers an action to capture the data and force the direct repeat purchase. The concrete tactic: a QR code on the packaging that leads to your own channel, with an incentive for the second order; it works because more than 89 million Americans scanned a QR code in 2025 (QR Code, 2025). The goal is to migrate the guest into a loyalty program, where members visit 40% or more often (Paytronix, 2024) and spend 38% more per visit (Paytronix, 2025).

5. How to turn delivery spend into a repeat-purchase asset

Diego F. Parra insists: the first aggregator purchase can lose margin if you treat it as an acquisition investment and not an isolated transaction. In a delivery market that in Latin America moved 32.42 billion dollars in GMV in 2025 (Grand View Research), the operator who captures the data stops renting guests and starts buying them once. Consolidating the acquisition cost in the P&L means putting into a single line the commission, the discount, the cost of your own delivery if any, and the value of the surrendered data, then comparing it against the guest's real LTV. Most owners view delivery commissions as "a necessary evil" without quantifying any of this. With food cost of 28%–35% (National Restaurant Association) and commissions of 25%–30%, an order can leave negative contribution margin if it also included a discount.

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

The Masterrestaurant discipline is pure unit economics: if the 12-month LTV of a captured guest comfortably exceeds the consolidated CAC —leveraged on the fact that a repeat customer spends 67% more (Restroworks, 2025)—, the spend is a purchase; if you do not capture it, it is perpetual rental. Poorly measured cash flow is the leading cause of small-business closure (Inc.); this calculation is what prevents it. Social discovery matters in the CAC calculation because it decides where the customer finds you cheaply before the expensive aggregator captures them. 67% of Gen Z decides where to eat based on social media and 41% uses TikTok to search for restaurants (TouchBistro and Restroworks, 2025). That owned channel lowers the acquisition cost against the aggregator's 25% commission, but only works if you measure it as part of the same P&L. Influencer marketing spend in the U.S. reached 10.52 billion dollars in 2025, up 23.7% (Socially Powerful), at an average of 202 dollars per collaboration (Collabstr, 2025): cheaper than ceding LTV to a platform indefinitely.

7. Social discovery is no longer optional to amortize CAC

A Google listing with more than 100 photos receives 520% more calls (Restroworks, 2025). The operator who masters discovery and repeat business turns CAC into an amortizable investment, not a guest rental. Commission is just the tip: the real cost includes discount, lost data and ceded LTV. A "profitable" app order often destroys contribution margin once consolidated. Without data ownership every new customer is a rental, not a purchase: you pay the full CAC again on the next order instead of amortizing it through repurchase. Correct unit economics compares CAC against LTV, not commission against ticket. A recurring customer spending 67% more per order (Restroworks, 2025) changes the equation entirely.

POINT BY POINT

Platform acquisition vs. direct repurchase: verdict by criterion

DECISION UNIT

A · PLATFORM ACQUISITION (INVISIBLE CAC)

Commission vs. order ticket

B · MASTERRESTAURANT 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 · MASTERRESTAURANT 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 · MASTERRESTAURANT 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 · MASTERRESTAURANT 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 **MASTERRESTAURANT**

- ✓ 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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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

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



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



More spend per order from recurring vs first-time customer



Higher visit frequency of loyalty members vs non-members



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



Adults ordering takeout every week (demand to capture direct)



Sources: [Toast 2025](#) · [Restroworks 2025](#) · [Paytronix 2024](#) · [Paytronix 2025](#) · [National Restaurant Association 2025](#)

Chart by [masterrestaurant.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, Masterrestaurant 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 $CAC = \text{commission} + \text{discount} + \text{campaign cost per new customer}$, 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 $\geq 35\%$ 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: $\geq 30\%$ 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
Altas de miembros de lealtad	Los mejores QSR inscriben ~110 nuevos miembros por tienda al mes	Paytronix — Annual Loyalty Report 2024
Frecuencia de compra de miembros de lealtad	81% de los miembros de lealtad en EE.UU. compran con más frecuencia que los no miembros	Paytronix — Annual Loyalty Report 2024
Ingresos por estrategia social	Restaurantes activos en redes reportaron +9.9% de ingresos directos B2C en 2024	Deloitte Digital — Social media strategies for restaurants
Ingresos de marcas 'social-first'	Las marcas con mejor estrategia social vieron +14.1% de ingresos	Deloitte Digital — Social media strategies for restaurants
Descubrimiento en Instagram	60% de los consumidores usa Instagram para encontrar restaurantes nuevos	Tablein — Restaurant Social Media Marketing Statistics 2024
Redes sociales y decisión (Gen Z)	67% de la Gen Z y 57% de los millennials se apoyan en redes para decidir dónde comer	Tablein — Restaurant Social Media Marketing Statistics 2024

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