

Bargains heating up at MLB concession stands !

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With an eye on providing more value to maintain and spur ticket sales, several Major League Baseball teams are rolling back food and beverage prices this season.

The San Diego Padres, deeply dialing back prices beyond the traditional Dollar Dog Night and Kids Meal promotions, grabbed everybody's attention last week when they announced a "five for \$5" deal good for all 81 home games at Petco Park.

Fans will receive a regular hot dog, a 22-ounce soda, a medium bag of popcorn, a small bag of peanuts and a large cookie for \$5.

The deal provides an \$8 to \$10 savings compared with what those items would cost if purchased individually, said Richard Andersen, the Padres' executive vice president of ballpark management. The hot dog alone would cost \$4, Andersen said.

But the Padres aren't the only team rolling out new menus and pricing. Delaware North Sportservice, the Padres' vendor, worked with suppliers in the offseason to develop new offerings and smaller portions to sell at lower prices, said Richard Dobransky, vice president of food and beverage.

The Padres offer a "five for \$5" deal at Petco Park while the Pirates (below) will be extending their Dollar Dog Night promotion.



The firm is testing the fast-food model of dollar menus at two permanent stands in Cincinnati and one location in Milwaukee. The dollar menu at Miller Park includes a slightly smaller hot dog, 12-ounce soda, 24-ounce cup of popcorn, small ice cream cone and large cookie, said Tom Olson, Sportservice's on-site general manager. Sportservice also trimmed prices by 25 cents on 10 regular items.

The Brewers approached Sportservice about making changes to concessions this season, and after some initial brainstorming, Rick Abramson, the vendor's president, came up with the dollar menu, according to Rick Schlesinger, the Brewers' executive vice president of business operations. Together, they are working out the logistical and financial implications for selling a few \$1 items.

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Teams and concessionaires realize the price restrictions could lead to lower revenue, but all point to the dismal economy as driving the lower concession costs.

"These are extraordinary times and we are all trying to drive traffic into our facilities and create value," Andersen said. "We recognize there is no money to be made [from this deal], but it's an opportunity to do the right thing and build loyalty to our brand."

Elsewhere, Centerplate and Levy Restaurants, after discussions with their MLB clients, are introducing new value meals or freezing concession prices this season.

At AT&T Park in San Francisco, Centerplate will debut smaller sizes of popcorn, peanuts, soft drinks and ice cream novelties for \$2.50, a savings of up to \$2 compared with larger portions.

The Arizona Diamondbacks and Levy have held the line on food and drink prices after revamping menus last season. More than 10 items are priced at \$4 or less at Chase Field, including a 24-ounce soda and 14-ounce beer, said team President and CEO Derrick Hall.

The Pittsburgh Pirates, an Aramark client, plan to expand their Dollar Dog Night promotion to include all 13 Friday games at PNC Park, a team spokesman said. Last season, Aramark sold \$1 hot dogs for five Wednesday night games.

But so far, the Padres are the most aggressive first-movers, slashing prices for regular items without shrinking portions in their "five for \$5" promotion.

Soon after the news broke last week about the deal, several clubs contacted the Padres to ask about their rollbacks, including the 50-cent cuts on all bottled and draft beer prices, Andersen said.

Andersen, without disclosing whether Sportservice's long-term contract was restructured to reflect the price reductions, said the two parties worked together to develop the deals.

In the current economy, he said teams have to concentrate on generating "penny profits" instead of holding out for the double-digit margins they traditionally expect from concessions. Long term, Schlesinger could not say whether the Brewers' dollar menu will stick beyond this season, but one food consultant sees the test as one more wakeup call for how teams conduct business with their concessionaires.

"I don't see this as a temporary correction," said John Sergi, who consults on food operations for the New York Mets and Los Angeles Dodgers.

"The sports industry needs to address the underpinnings of the pricing structure and what it means to the team's business as a whole."

