

Is the Trucker's Life for Me?

I GET ABOUT three to four e-mails a day from people looking to open food trucks. People who are passionate about food and weighed down by the routine of an office job are often attracted to the promise of freedom that owning a food truck seems to convey. While the experience of eating at a brightly colored and well-designed food truck is fun, and the concept of owning a food truck looks like a carefree way to cruise around the city and make a lot of cash on a sunny day, the reality is much different. There are some amazing advantages to operating a food truck, but also some big challenges. It is definitely an exciting opportunity, but it is good to embrace this lifestyle with a complete knowledge of the pros and cons of this career.

A Day in the Life

In order to get a better sense of what life is like as a food truck operator, I thought I'd share with you a typical day. Food truck entrepreneurs often work on their trucks on a daily or near-daily basis. Some entrepreneurs aspire to grow their businesses and move out of the daily operations as they build a fleet of trucks or settle into a brick-and-mortar establishment. It helps to begin with the end in mind, but regardless of your goals, you'll definitely be spending a lot of time on your truck.

The length of a typical day can vary, depending on the type of food you serve. To service just the lunch shift could easily require a 10-hour day, from 8 AM to 6 PM, including prep and end-of-day cleaning. To make ends meet, some trucks run breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with load-in starting at 4 AM and not ending until 2 AM.

In this example, let's assume that you are a savory food truck serving the lunch crowd.

At the Commissary

The day begins at the commissary. It's the home of your truck, your tools, and your food: everything you need to run the operation. Your commissary is probably in an industrial district outside of town, where the rent is cheaper. Because it is an out-of-the-way location, the commute may be inconvenient for you and your employees.

You'll need to arrive at the commissary two to four hours before you plan to serve, depending on where your food is prepared, the length of your commute, and traffic in your city. If you're hoping to serve lunch at 11 AM, your team will likely have to be at the commissary by 8 AM at the latest to have enough time to prep, and you'll likely want to arrive before that to get administrative work done before the beginning of the day.

Once there, the first thing you'll need to do is prep any food that you'll be bringing that day. Food trucks generally have small kitchens, so anything you can do ahead of time that can speed up your service and allow you to carry more should be done before you hit the road. You might spend some time making special sauces, cutting vegetables, or baking cookies. The time you spend prepping really depends on the type of truck. It could be a few minutes of assembling a hot sauce or hours of slowly braising barbecued ribs. Many trucks employ a prep team that just prepares food.

Once your food is in order, you need to check out the truck and see if it's ready for the day's shift. You run through a checklist to ensure that nothing unexpected has happened overnight. You check that the truck is plugged in and that any refrigeration units onboard have been working, and you also check for any food that might have spoiled.

You'll need to consider the location where you'll be going for the day and what the sales might be before you load up. No use bringing food you cannot sell, because it will go bad and cost you money. At the same time, you don't want to bring too little, because you'll miss out on potential sales. Pull everything onboard as quickly as you can. It helps if you have an employee so you can divide the work: someone grabs supplies while the other stows them. Because you've been doing this

for weeks it goes quickly: You refill all the essentials first, fresh water, ice, and propane. Cold products go in the coolers, frozen products go in the freezer, dry products get stowed in cabinets, and paper products are refilled.

It's time to head out. Check the fuel gauge and don't forget to unplug the truck before you pull out.

Setting Up on the Street

Some days you can breeze directly to your vending location, but other times it can take hours. Most trucks have a set of spots that they frequent, be it on the street, in food truck lots, or in private properties.

If you are vending on the street, allow extra time in your morning routine. Vending on the street is hard, because you need to find a place for your truck to vend daily. In any city, there is always a lot of competition for street parking, but there is even more competition for good street-vending locations. Often, a number of trucks might be vying for the same spot, which can cause conflict. It is extremely bad form to roll up on another vendor's established spot and can lead to conflict that can escalate very quickly. There are all sorts of examples of physical violence between vendors. Don't let this be you. If you cannot find your first choice, keep looking. If time is running low until lunch, you'll have to gamble and drive to other spots you use during the rest of the week. In the worst-case scenario, the whole day can be lost due to lack of a parking spot, so it is important to scout a number of possible vending spots in advance.

Once you're parked, it's prep time. Hopefully, you found a spot by 10 AM, which will give you an hour to prep before lunch. Turn off the truck, turn on the generator, and start heating up your equipment. Make sure to count the cash in the register before the start of the shift, and be ready to run to the bank if you need smaller bills.

Before opening your awning, run one last check to make sure every machine is running and all your food is fresh and ready to serve. Once you have a first batch of food ready, you're ready to serve.

Open for Business

By 11 AM you should be ready to open and begin serving your customers. Once open, you have to be ready for anything. Get a rhythm going

between you and your partner. Know who is working the register, and who is prepping the food. Be ready to improvise if the situation arises. All kinds of problems can, and will, flare up during your shift.

It's not hard to fall behind on orders, have machines malfunction, run out of smaller bills and have to run to the bank, and encounter other unforeseen dilemmas. All of these are problems that are easily dealt with, as long as you and your team keep your cool.

Once the lunch rush is over and the shift starts winding down around 3 PM, it's time to clean up. Even while you are waiting on the last few customers, start wiping down and cleaning everything up. Once everything is organized and packed away, head back to the commissary, stopping for gas if the truck needs a refill.

Closing

The lunch crowd winds down by 3 PM, so try to make it back to the commissary around 5 PM so that you are not caught in rush-hour traffic. At the commissary, drain all the wastewater into an approved drain and discard all your trash. Then do a thorough cleaning of the truck. Scrub the floors and the walls. Be sure to leave a note for yourself about what food has been left on the truck to save you or your partner some time the next morning. Plug the truck in for the night to keep the fridges running, and you're good until the next shift.

The Best Parts of Operating a Truck

Food truck entrepreneurs come from all walks of life and open trucks for a number of different reasons. Here are some of the best aspects of being in the food truck business.

Happy Customers!

There is nothing like the thrill you'll get from a customer who leaves the truck happy, having eaten a dish that you've made. Satisfied guests are the best.

Personal Expression

Owning a food truck allows you to express your culinary creativity and have control over every aspect of the business, so you can run it the way

you want to. If you care deeply about the environment, you can run it environmentally responsibly, or if you care deeply about locally sourced ingredients, you can buy only local food. It's your truck, your rules.

Building a Brand

Food trucks are an ideal platform to build a brand. If you have an idea for a concept that you think could be a great restaurant chain, but you do not have the resources or funding to build out a brick-and-mortar restaurant, a food truck could be the way to go. For a lot less capital, you can get a proof of concept and demonstrate to potential investors that there is demand for your idea and that it would translate well into a restaurant. If you already have an existing restaurant, a food truck is a great way to extend the brand and reach new customers.

Get Out of the Cubicle!

If the movie *Office Space* were written today, you could be sure that the protagonist, Peter Gibbons (played by Ron Livingston), would open his own food truck, rather than getting a job in construction. Food trucks offer the promise of freedom and flexibility, getting you away from the nine-to-five office doldrums and from the administrative challenges and protocols that come with working in a big company. Food trucks are outdoors and mobile. If things aren't working out well, you can always move along to the next great opportunity.

Accessible Entrepreneurship

Running your own business has all sorts of emotional and psychological perks. You will have control over your own schedule. You will have the ability to be involved in every aspect of your business and can make your own arrangements concerning who you do business with. And you'll also have the satisfaction of creating jobs for other people.

The Worst Parts of Operating a Truck

While trucks might look bright and shiny and fun, owning a truck isn't all excitement and smiles. There is a lot of blood, sweat, and

tears that go into a successful food truck operation (and even more blood, sweat, and tears can be caused by an unsuccessful food truck operation).

The Tip of the Iceberg

The busy lunch shift for a popular food truck is just a fraction of the operation. Prior to the great two hours of sales that a customer witnesses from noon to 2 PM are hours of training, preparation, lifting, cleaning, and transportation. One thing that cannot be stressed enough is that operating a food truck is extremely hard work. Running a food truck means long days of waking up early to oversee food prep at the commissary in the morning and late nights checking on the cleanliness of the truck after a shift.

Endless Repairs

Food trucks break down *a lot*. And when they break down, everything stops. Besides the cost of these repairs, waiting a week for the fix while you cannot work (and therefore lose income) is unbearably stressful. Add to that the stress of your employees calling and being upset that their shifts have been cancelled and the fact that all the food in the commissary's fridge is going to go bad while your truck is in the shop. Repairs that take down the truck are inevitable and are bad not only for business but also for morale.

Trucks Don't Scale Well

One of the most challenging aspects of food trucks is that the business is not easily scalable. Trucks are generally pretty small operations with one to three people on board at a time. They don't generate enough revenue to support managers, so they require very well-trained and competent employees. Also, because so much of the business is done in cash, "shrinkage" is always a concern. It is very easy for employees to run creative schemes to divert revenue from the legitimate operation into their own pockets.

Conflict

While many consumers love food trucks, they aren't universally appreciated. Unfortunately, conflict with other members of the community can occur, sometimes quite frequently, depending on where you live. Many retail shops, especially restaurant and deli owners, see food trucks only as competitors and not as an opportunity or as collaborators. Also, conflict with other street vendors isn't uncommon. There is often friction between older, more-established street vendors and newer vendors. The best policy is to be cool, be respectful, and stay connected with the community.

Are You a Peddler?

As a food truck entrepreneur, you need to be ready to embrace the life of a peddler, which requires a level of dedication that many underestimate from the onset. The quickest road to success is by operating the truck yourself. The lower revenues of food trucks usually means that they cannot financially support an on-site manager, so as a food truck owner, you are making a full-time commitment to oversee the operations of this business. Being on the truck will also give you the opportunity to define and articulate the brand personally to your customers.

Deal Breakers . . .

There are life's little unhappy accidents that inevitably happen and that can make life on the streets trying, at best.

- **Engine stall:** It can happen at any time: in the middle of a left-hand turn, in the middle of traffic, even while crossing a bridge. It can cause a few moments' delay or shut down a whole shift. Always know where your hand brake is. It can save you from serious trouble.
- **Broken equipment:** If any steamers, cookers, fryers, or freezers are broken, they can ruin an entire shift. Either you're unable to cook anything, or your food has been spoiled.
- **Generator problems:** If the generator doesn't start at all, your shift can be over before it even gets started.

- **Running out of small bills and no bank in sight:** A simple one, but if you don't have small bills, it can impede your ability to sell. No money, no sales. Plan ahead, especially for big events on the weekends.
- **Out of materials:** If you're missing napkins, utensils, or bags, things get especially tough. If you run out of containers for food, you won't be able to sell anything.
- **No parking:** This doesn't seem like a shift-killer, but it can easily stop the day from even starting. If you have to spend most of your time looking for a spot, you'll either miss the lunch rush, be unable to find a spot at all, or open where none of your clientele can find you.
- **Police:** Especially in cities with contention over food trucks, this can be a real problem, depending on the neighborhood. If the police keep forcing you to move, you won't have time to prep or cook, meaning you will not be able to sell during prime meal times and your prospects of earning revenue for the day are ruined.
- **Food spoiled:** If anything has thawed accidentally or gone bad, you'll be in trouble. You're either going to be out of an item, or you're going to be hearing some serious complaints from customers.
- **Fender-benders and accidents:** It may or may not be your fault, but a bad enough accident can put your truck out of commission for the foreseeable future.
- **Electrical issues:** Problems with wiring can cause all sorts of problems and lead to overheating, undercooked food, and/or burnouts. In the worst-case scenario, electrical issues could lead to a fire and cause a lot of damage and close your truck for weeks.
- **Propane explosion:** Handle propane extremely carefully. It is very combustible. Never drive with your propane tanks open. If a propane tank is damaged and explodes, it could cause an enormous amount of damage to your staff, your truck, and anyone or anything nearby.
- **Ruining food:** If you're not focused, it's easy to overcook your food. Leaving anything unattended, or forgetting how long you've been cooking it, is a surefire way to do damage to a shift and your reputation. Too many mistakes like this, and you risk running out of food early or not having enough to serve customers on time.

Getting Rich Quick!?

There is money to be made in mobile food, but food trucks are not a get-rich-quick scheme. Food trucks offer lower capital costs, so it is easier to get started as a food truck entrepreneur than as a brick-and-mortar restaurant owner. However, the core economic foundations of the business need to be in place. We will explore the core financial details of operating a food truck in a later chapter. If making a million dollars is your goal, food trucks might not be the best route to achieve your dreams.

Scared?

If this chapter puts some fear into the pit of your stomach, that's okay—it is meant to. Some apprehension is healthy. Opening a food truck business is a major and difficult undertaking, and you should go into it as you would any new venture, with your eyes open to all of the potential hardships and challenges. If you're still optimistic about starting a food truck business, knowing all the challenges that are in store for you, that is a good thing. Now we can move on to the nuts and bolts of planning your business.