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Ads say dine out and help economy

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Battered by the dire economy, New Jersey restaurant owners are urging diners to rethink their eating habits.

The Trenton-based New Jersey Restaurant Association today launches a radio campaign to get more diners into the state's eateries as they struggle with falling traffic and revenue.

The association, which represents 23,000 eating and drinking establishments, is distributing thousands of bumper stickers and decals to be displayed in restaurants, stating "Dine out often — you deserve it."

The association's \$10,000 radio campaign has a similar message.

Deborah Dowdell, the association's president, said members suggested the campaign as it became clear that the post-Thanksgiving, pre-Christmas season would be weak. Restaurateurs generally count on the period to tide them over through January and February, which are slow at the best of times.

"Our members said the first quarter of 2009 is going to be make or break," she said. "And the media quite frankly keeps saying: 'Here are 10 things you can do to weather the economic storm — don't eat out. Dine at home.' "

Noting that dining out fuels the economy as much as other consumption, Dowdell described the campaign as a "public service message that we, unfortunately, have to pay for."

The campaign also includes a new section of the association Web site that describes the importance of the industry to the state economy: It employs 311,000 people and has sales of \$12 billion a year. The site also enables visitors to search a database for the restaurants in their area.

Jack Koumbis, owner of the Assembly Steakhouse in Englewood Cliffs, said the campaign is designed to remind people that dining is a key part of the culture.

"We are hoping, obviously, to increase traffic," he said. "We are trying to get the word out that we are there."

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