Executive Briefs

Delivery subscriptions and memberships: the discount your *P&L* cannot absorb

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-09-04 · Dark Kitchens & Foodtech

QUICK VERDICT

Verdict: delivery subscriptions and memberships create value only when the discount you give away is paid for by INCREMENTAL frequency carrying its own contribution margin, never by the margin of an order the guest was already going to place. The governance error I keep meeting in boardrooms is treating the aggregator's membership as marketing spend nobody audits, when it permanently rewrites the unit economics of every order. With nearly 75% of U.S. restaurant traffic already off-premise according to the National Restaurant Association (2025), the channel is far too large to run on instinct. The correct method: model the subscribed order against its own break-even, demand a written commission cap, measure frequency by cohort before and after, and shut the program down if aggregate contribution margin has not beaten baseline at day 90.

Executive Brief Strategic brief · CEOs, boards & investors · 15 min read · 2026-09-04

An operator in the 500 thousand to 1 million USD annual band showed me a dashboard last year: delivery GMV up 31%, EBITDA down. The aggregator's subscription plan, free shipping plus a permanent 10%, had captured his best customers, the ones already ordering four times a month, and handed them a discount nobody had asked for.

That is the pattern. A membership does not manufacture demand on its own; it reroutes existing demand toward the cheapest tariff, and the difference comes out of the restaurant's contribution margin, not the aggregator's balance sheet. With 46% of U.S. diners preferring third-party apps and close to five orders a month per user according to DoorDash (Restaurant Business, 2024), that tariff carries the bulk of the channel.

So the board question is not whether to join. It is what each discount point costs once you multiply it by real frequency, and what evidence you require before signing. Diego F. Parra works this with the Masterestaurant methodology: unit economics of the order first, scale second.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)	EXPECTED RESULT WITH THE MASTERESTAURANT METHOD
Effective commission per aggregator order	✕ Up to 30% uncapped; NYC set a 15% delivery and 5% other-services cap (Restaurant Business, 2023)	✓ Effective commission ≤20% in writing, using the 15% cap as the market anchor
Extra discount inside the subscription plan	✕ Free shipping plus a permanent 10% off ticket across aggregator membership programs	✓ Discount capped at 5-7% and limited to dishes with contribution margin above 68%
Food cost of the catalogue published in the channel	✕ Same menu as the dining room, exposing 34-38% food cost dishes to the discount	✓ Food cost ≤32% per dish in the delivery catalogue, per the Masterestaurant costing rule
Order frequency per subscribed customer	✕ Nearly 5 orders a month on third-party apps (DoorDash via Restaurant Business, 2024)	✓ Measurable incremental frequency by cohort: +1.2 orders/month or the plan is switched off at day 90
Off-premise weight in total sales	✕ 29% of sales today, 35% projected for 2026 (National Restaurant Association, 2025)	✓ Same weight, with channel contribution margin audited monthly against the dining room
Average ticket of the subscribed order	✕ Flat ticket: the discount applies with no minimum basket condition	✓ Minimum basket above the historical average ticket, with menu engineering on the subscribed combo
Single-aggregator dependency	✕ Concentration in one app; Rappi reports 35 million active users (operating report, 2024)	✓ No channel above 40% of GMV, with owned channel and Google Business Profile as counterweight

	INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)	EXPECTED RESULT WITH THE MASTERESTAURANT METHOD
Program governance	✕ Marketing decision, no board review, no exit clause	✓ Quarterly operational due diligence, signed margin KPI, 30-day exit clause

1. What does a delivery membership actually measure before you sign it?

It measures one thing: how many NEW orders the program brings versus how many existing orders it discounts, and that subtraction runs on contribution margin per order, not on GMV.

The aggregator will show you volume growth because that is their metric, and yours is a different one. With 46% of U.S. diners preferring third-party apps and nearly five orders per month per user according to DoorDash (Restaurant Business, 2024), a permanent 10% discount gets multiplied by sixty transactions a year on every loyal customer you already had. The correct calculation separates the installed base from the incremental one: if 70% of membership orders came from customers already buying quarter after quarter, you did not buy demand, you bought a retroactive rebate on your own clientele and financed it out of cash. Fifteen percent is the number regulation put on the table when San Francisco capped delivery commissions at 15% (Restaurant Dive, 2020) and New York made it permanent with 15% per delivery plus 5% for other services (Restaurant Business, 2023).

2. The commission ceiling the industry already found through legislation

Those caps did not come out of an operators' assembly: they came from auditing what load a restaurant P&L can carry without breaking the unit. Outside those jurisdictions nobody hands you the ceiling, so use it as an internal benchmark. Add effective commission plus membership discount and compare the total against 20%: if your dish runs 30% food cost and 4% packaging, every point above that aggregate 20% comes straight out of the margin that pays rent. That is the boundary, and it is arithmetic, not negotiation. In the small band the recommendation is DO NOT join the aggregator's subscription program while average contribution margin per delivery order sits below 38%. An operator this size moves between 15 and 40 orders a day through the channel, and lacks the volume to amortize a permanent discount with added frequency; you simply sell the same thing cheaper.

3. Under 500 thousand USD a year: stay out, or enter with a closed catalog

If you still want presence, expose a closed catalog of six to eight dishes with food cost between 28% and 30%, well under the 32% maximum set by the Masterestaurant costing rule, and keep anything above 32% out of the program. With nearly 75% of restaurant traffic already off-premise according to the National Restaurant Association (2025), being absent is no option either; being exposed without a filter is an expensive mistake. This is where the trap detonates. An operator this size showed me a dashboard last year with delivery GMV growing 31% while EBITDA fell, and the cause was precisely the aggregator membership: free shipping and a permanent 10% had captured his best customers, the ones already ordering four times a month. Your decision threshold is this: join the program only if you can prove, using the aggregator's own data, that at least 35% of membership orders come from accounts with no purchases in the prior 90 days.

4. From 500 thousand to 1 million: the band where GMV rises and EBITDA falls

If they will not hand you that number broken out, the answer is no, because you would be funding it blind. Diego F. Parra frames this discussion with the Masterestaurant methodology: unit economics of the order first, scale afterward. Past a million in annual revenue you already own a database, and with a database the membership must be YOURS. The call: launch a proprietary program on your direct channel before expanding the aggregator's, with a simple threshold of 1,200 identified repeat customers and an average frequency of 1.8 orders per month. DoorDash generated nearly 60 billion dollars in sales for local merchants in 2024 according to its annual report, and that volume proves the channel works; what it does not prove is who keeps the relationship. A 9-dollar monthly plan with waived delivery on orders above 25 dollars, billed by you, turns the discount into deferred revenue and returns the customer data.

5. Above 1 million: negotiate your own program before someone else's

Keep the aggregator as pure acquisition, never as retention. Two profiles play differently in this band: the media-chef restaurant with a strong personal brand and the large-format themed venue with 300 seats and tourist flow. Neither should enter a percentage-discount membership, because their average check —between 45 and 80 dollars— turns every point into real money, and their demand is not elastic to price but to reservations. For them the right membership is one of ACCESS: table priority, closed tasting menu, seasonal presale. The delivery channel of these houses should run under a satellite brand with a separate catalog, leaning on ghost kitchen infrastructure, which surpassed 20,000 operating locations in the United States in 2023 according to Statista. Blending the flagship brand with a permanent discount destroys pricing power in the dining room. At group scale, subscription stops being a pricing tactic and becomes infrastructure, with one clear operating threshold: launch nothing below 25,000 active members projected over twelve months, because under that figure the platform and CRM cost never amortizes.

6. Above 10 million (group or chain): the membership is a data asset

The scale reference exists and it is brutal —Meituan reported more than 770 million transacting users in 2024 (Q4 2024 Earnings), and Rappi declared 35 million active users as of August 2024—, so the question is not whether the model works, but whether you control the data. A group with eight or more units should negotiate tiered commission with the aggregator in exchange for guaranteed volume, and run its own membership in parallel. Two channels, two economics, one identified customer. Suppose you enroll the full catalog, give away a permanent 10%, and average frequency moves from 2.1 to 2.3 orders per customer per month. That 9.5% lift in orders looks like a win until you cross it against the discount applied to the entire base: if 100% of orders lose 10 points of price to gain 9.5% of volume, and your contribution margin was 40%, absolute margin drops around 12%.

7. What happens if the discount fails to generate incremental frequency

Now add that off-premise sales go from 29% today to a projected 35% by 2026 according to the National Restaurant Association (2025), which means that degraded channel will be an ever larger share of your business. A discount without incremental frequency is not a weak campaign: it is a structural price cut dressed up as a loyalty program. Where the order comes from. A membership that brings guests who never bought from you pays for its own discount; one that merely cheapens your loyal customer transfers your contribution margin straight into the diner's pocket, and the aggregator contributes nothing. The catalogue you expose. A permanent 10% on 36% food cost dishes leaves a contribution margin that will not even cover packaging; at food cost ≤32%, per the Masterestaurant costing rule, that same discount still leaves room. The commission cap. When San Francisco limited delivery commissions to 15% (Restaurant Dive, 2020) and New York made 15% per delivery plus 5% for other services permanent (Restaurant Business, 2023), the industry learned which number an operator can actually carry.

8. What separates a profitable program from one that bleeds?

Outside those cities, you negotiate for it. Measurement. Without cohorts there is no evidence, and without evidence the board decides on narrative. The nearly five monthly orders DoorDash reports (Restaurant Business, 2024) is a market average, not your baseline;

yours lives in your own data. Dependency. A virtual restaurant or dark kitchen living off one app's algorithm carries concentrated territory risk, and the owned channel, the Google Business Profile listing and geotargeted advertising are the risk mitigation no membership plan will hand you.

POINT BY POINT

Board decision matrix

WHERE THE DISCOUNTED ORDER ORIGINATES

A · INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)

Every subscribed order is assumed to be new revenue

B · MASTERESTAURANT Cohorts separate new demand from cannibalised demand

Verdict: The right method wins: without cohorts you cannot tell whether you bought customers or gifted margin to the ones you had.

CATALOGUE EXPOSED TO THE BENEFIT

A · INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)

The entire menu, including 34-38% food cost dishes

B · MASTERESTAURANT Twelve to fifteen dishes at food cost ≤32% and margin above 68%

Verdict: Curated catalogue. A permanent 10% on a 36% food cost dish will not even cover the packaging.

EFFECTIVE COMMISSION

A · INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)

Nominal rate agreed verbally, effective rate 8-10 points higher

B · MASTERESTAURANT Written cap ≤20%, anchored to NYC's legal 15% (Restaurant Business, 2023)

Verdict: Written cap. A commission that is not in the contract always ends up above what you budgeted.

REVIEW HORIZON

A · INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)

No cut-off date; reviewed once EBITDA drops

B · MASTERESTAURANT 90-day cut-off with a numeric threshold and a 30-day exit clause

Verdict: The 90-day cut-off. Setting the shutdown rule before seeing the data removes the board's bias.

CHANNEL DEPENDENCY

A · INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)

One aggregator concentrates most digital GMV

B · MASTERESTAURANT No channel above 40%, with local SEO and Google Business Profile driving direct orders

Verdict: Diversify. Territory risk inside someone else's algorithm is not hedged by a better membership plan.

THE METRIC THAT GETS BOARD APPROVAL

A · INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)

GMV and subscriber count

B · MASTERESTAURANT Contribution margin per order and incremental frequency

Verdict: Margin and frequency. GMV rises with any discount, which is precisely what makes it useless for governance.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

The error: membership as a marketing line

WHAT DESTROYS MARGIN

- ✕ The aggregator plan gets signed without modelling contribution margin on the subscribed order.
- ✕ The discount hits the whole menu, including 36% food cost dishes that were already earning nothing.
- ✕ GMV growth gets celebrated without separating new demand from cannibalised demand.
- ✕ Nobody measures frequency by cohort before and after, so there is no BEFORE to compare against.
- ✕ Effective commission is agreed verbally and lands 8-10 points above nominal once fees and ads pile on.
- ✕ No review date, no exit clause; the damage surfaces only after EBITDA has already dropped.

The right method: decision architecture MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ Model the subscribed order against its own break-even before signing, dish by dish.
- ✓ Restrict the benefit to a curated catalogue with food cost ≤32% and contribution margin above 68%.
- ✓ Demand a written commission cap, anchoring the negotiation to New York's legal 15%.
- ✓ Track cohorts: frequency, ticket and margin of subscribed versus non-subscribed over 90 days.
- ✓ Push the owned channel with local SEO and Google Business Profile so the aggregator is not the only door.
- ✓ Quarterly board review on the M&E Console: if aggregate margin has not risen, the plan is switched off.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)	EXPECTED RESULT WITH THE MASTERESTAURANT METHOD
Effective commission per aggregator order	✕ Up to 30% uncapped; NYC set a 15% delivery and 5% other-services cap (Restaurant Business, 2023)	✓ Effective commission ≤20% in writing, using the 15% cap as the market anchor
Extra discount inside the subscription plan	✕ Free shipping plus a permanent 10% off ticket across aggregator membership programs	✓ Discount capped at 5-7% and limited to dishes with contribution margin above 68%
Food cost of the catalogue published in the channel	✕ Same menu as the dining room, exposing 34-38% food cost dishes to the discount	✓ Food cost ≤32% per dish in the delivery catalogue, per the Masterestaurant costing rule
Order frequency per subscribed customer	✕ Nearly 5 orders a month on third-party apps (DoorDash via Restaurant Business, 2024)	✓ Measurable incremental frequency by cohort: +1.2 orders/month or the plan is switched off at day 90
Off-premise weight in total sales	✕ 29% of sales today, 35% projected for 2026 (National Restaurant Association, 2025)	✓ Same weight, with channel contribution margin audited monthly against the dining room

	INDUSTRY BASELINE (CITED SOURCE)	EXPECTED RESULT WITH THE MASTERESTAURANT METHOD
Average ticket of the subscribed order	✕ Flat ticket: the discount applies with no minimum basket condition	✓ Minimum basket above the historical average ticket, with menu engineering on the subscribed combo
Single-aggregator dependency	✕ Concentration in one app; Rappi reports 35 million active users (operating report, 2024)	✓ No channel above 40% of GMV, with owned channel and Google Business Profile as counterweight
Program governance	✕ Marketing decision, no board review, no exit clause	✓ Quarterly operational due diligence, signed margin KPI, 30-day exit clause

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The numbers that govern the decision

15 %
permanent legal cap on delivery commission in New York (plus 5% for other services)

75 %
of U.S. restaurant traffic now happens off-premise

46 %
of diners prefer third-party apps, ordering nearly 5 times a month

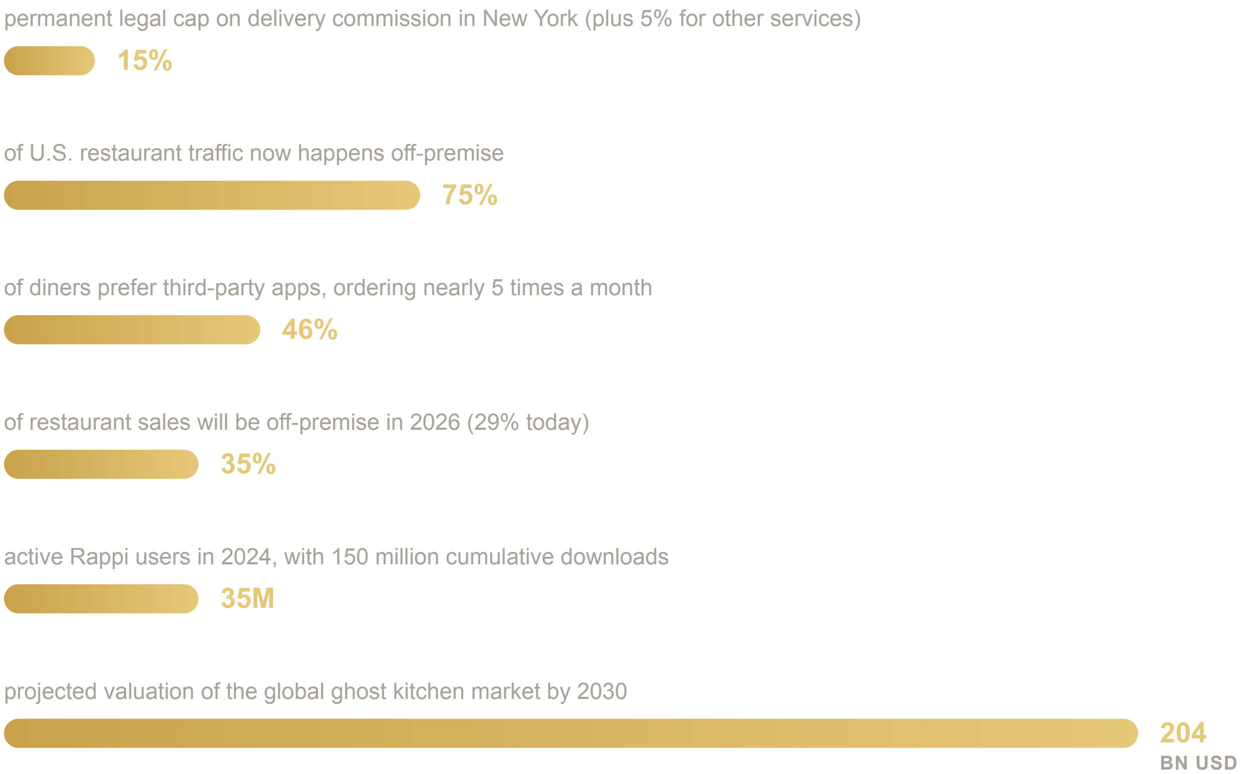
35 %
of restaurant sales will be off-premise in 2026 (29% today)

35 M
active Rappi users in 2024, with 150 million cumulative downloads

204
BN USD
projected valuation of the global ghost kitchen market by 2030

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: Restaurant Business 2023 · National Restaurant Association 2025 · DoorDash via Restaurant Business 2024 · Rappi (operating report) 2024 · GlobeNewswire 2026

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

> *"We joined the subscription plan with free delivery and 10% off the entire menu. GMV rose 31% in four months and EBITDA fell 2.4 points. Once we split the cohorts we saw that 71% of discounted orders came from guests already ordering three or four times a month: we were giving away margin we already had. We cut the benefit down to twelve dishes under 32% food cost, set a minimum basket above our average ticket, and negotiated effective commission to 19%. GMV gave back 6 points and channel contribution margin rose 5.8 points the following quarter."*
>
> **— Operations director, three-unit group with an attached dark kitchen, 500 thousand to 1 million USD annual band**

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How is it implemented in 90 days?

1. **Phase 1 · Days 1-30: operational due diligence on the channel**
   Deliverable: a unit economics model of the subscribed order, dish by dish, loaded with real effective commission rather than nominal, plus packaging, waste and geotargeted advertising. The delivery menu is separated from the dining room menu and every dish is tagged with its food cost and contribution margin. Success metric: 100% of the channel catalogue costed, with at least twelve dishes below 32%. This phase also audits the Google Business Profile listing and Maps ranking, because an order arriving through local search pays no aggregator commission.

2. **Phase 2 · Days 31-60: benefit redesign and renegotiation**
   Deliverable: a rewritten membership plan with the discount capped at 5-7%, a minimum basket above historical average ticket and a curated catalogue, plus a contract carrying a written commission cap anchored to New York's legal 15% (Restaurant Business, 2023). Success metric: effective commission ≤20% signed, and modelled contribution margin ≥68% on every eligible dish. Menu engineering is applied to the subscribed combo so the discount always travels with a high-margin side.

3. **Phase 3 · Days 61-90: cohorts, governance and the call**
   Deliverable: a cohort dashboard of subscribed versus non-subscribed guests tracking frequency, average ticket and contribution margin, plus the board minute carrying a 30-day exit clause. Success metric: incremental frequency ≥1.2 orders per customer per month and channel contribution margin above the previous quarter's baseline; miss it and the program is switched off without debate. That pre-agreed shutdown, decided before the data exists, is what turns a marketing bet into decision architecture.

FAQ

Board questions

What does it cost NOT to join a delivery subscription program?

It costs algorithmic visibility: aggregators rank program merchants higher in the feed. With 29% of sales already off-premise and 35% projected for 2026 according to the National Restaurant Association (2025), staying out without a strong owned channel shrinks reach. The right answer is joining with a capped discount, not abstaining and not signing blind.

Does a dark kitchen absorb a membership better than a brick-and-mortar restaurant?

Structurally, yes. A ghost kitchen carries no dining room or service payroll, so its break-even absorbs a permanent discount more comfortably. With over 20,000 ghost kitchen locations operating in the U.S. according to Statista, the format exists for exactly that. Food cost still rules, though: above 32%, the structural advantage evaporates.

Does one plan work to increase sales on Rappi and on iFood alike?

No. Each aggregator weighs catalogue, prep time and acceptance rate differently inside its AI recommendation shortlists. Rappi reports 35 million active users (operating report, 2024) with aggressive discount mechanics. Model margin per platform and negotiate the commission cap separately in each contract.

Which KPI should the board demand every quarter?

Channel contribution margin per subscribed order against the previous quarter's baseline, plus incremental frequency by cohort. GMV is useless as a governance KPI: by definition it rises with any discount. Diego F. Parra recommends a written threshold, +1.2 orders per customer per month, and a 30-day exit clause.

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
Liderazgo de Asia-Pacífico en robótica de cocina	**42% de cuota de mercado en 2024**	Market Data Forecast 2024
Entregas autónomas de robots Starship	**5,8 millones de entregas completadas en 2024**	Forbes 2025
Ganancia por hora de repartidores de Uber Eats	**US$ 14,96 por hora en promedio en 2024 (−5%)**	Gridwise 2024
Ganancia por hora de repartidores de DoorDash	**US$ 12,23 por hora en promedio en 2024 (−3%)**	Gridwise 2024
Tope legal a comisiones de delivery en Nueva York	**Máximo 15% por entrega y 5% por otros servicios (tope permanente)**	Restaurant Business 2023
Tope a comisiones de delivery en San Francisco	**Comisiones limitadas al 15%**	Restaurant Dive 2020

Author: Diego F. Parra · **Publisher:** MASTERESTAURANT®

Content created with AI assistance, reviewed by the MASTERESTAURANT editorial team.