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Can 'Expense-a-Steak' Save the Restaurant Industry?

By Kelly Evans

If there's one place hard-pressed consumers and companies are cutting back, it's on restaurant meals.

Survey after survey shows they're one of the first items cut from budgets, and one of the least likely to return. According to Sageworks, Inc., sales at privately-owned full-service restaurants slowed 23% through July since the start of the recession in December 2007.

But the suits miss their steaks.

Enter Midtown Manhattan steakhouse [Maloney & Porcelli's "Expense-a-Steak"](#) tool. The premise is simple: enter the amount of your restaurant bill, click "EXPENSE IT!", and the program automatically generates a print-ready page of fake receipts for work-related expenses like office supplies and cab fare totaling the same amount — so power-lunchers can enjoy their steak frites without drawing the boss's ire.

"Is it advertising? Is it PR?... Is it aiding and abetting in fraud?" asks [Ad Age scribe Bob Garfield](#). "Dunno for sure. But... We LOVE this thing. It is brilliant."

The Web site is just a week old but already has some 88,000 receipt downloads, according to Deacon Webster, chief creative officer at [Walrus](#), the New York-based agency behind the campaign.

He added that the receipts, while remarkably authentic, are not intended to be passed off as the real thing. "If somebody's letting a receipt for \$3,000 worth of cyan toner through their department, then we're the last people who'll get in trouble."

On its Web site, Walrus notes that Maloney & Porcelli, which is owned by [Fourth Wall Restaurants Inc.](#), "sits at 50th and Park, in the heart of expense account country, footsteps away from the likes of Citigroup, Blackstone and Morgan Stanley... but with CFOs keeping tabs on every cent, it takes guts to turn in a receipt from a huge meal."

"We can tell it's been kicking around those places," said Mr. Webster. "Morgan Stanley, Bank of America, Citibank, American Express, J.P. Morgan all have like 100 unique visits from their offices."

The campaign isn't just online — Walrus has also replaced the restaurant's emblazoned takeout bags with fake ones from cheaper chain restaurants (though well known Italian- and Mexican-food chains have issued cease-and-desist orders), so diners can disguise their leftovers as cheaper fare. And a new blackboard sign outside the restaurant features sassy quips (like "\$5 Footlong Breadsticks") to help draw foot traffic.

“We know people have gotten a kick out of it and the restaurant has been busy,” Mr. Webster said.