Adapting Restaurant Standards to Improve Your Foodservice Operations

by Michael Williams/Unifed Brands

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Millennials’ and retiring Boomers’ desire for fresh, partially or fully prepared food has swelled in recent years. Some grocers have targeted this trend by expanding their deli, while others have seized the opportunity to “up their game” by prioritizing the appearance and feel of dining into a restaurant-like experience. Consumers spend more money when they feel comfortable and enjoy the experience, and the food, atmosphere and equipment all make a difference.

Grocery operators who currently run in-store foodservice operations have applied the concept in a variety of ways. From meat-and-three lunch lines to full “grocerconcepts,” the goal is to enhance profits. Prepared foods drive higher margins than traditional grocery products; however, the operating and equipment costs are higher as well. This is why the first step an operator should take is to establish an independent P&L for the operation. This puts the higher operating costs in perspective with double-digit margins. Operators also should consider other restaurant industry standards. Let’s explore a few standards that can add structure and accountability to a grocery store-based foodservice operation.

Employees

Let’s begin with the employees. Even if you have the finest facility, employees can make or break a concept. Frontline employees are the face of your business. How is their attitude? Are they a shining and helpful asset for your business? How about their apparel? It must be clean, neat and coordinated with the remainder of the foodservice team. Yes, I said the foodservice team. It is important to have a team dedicated to foodservice. They must be trained in sanitation, food safety, task skills (i.e., food prep, customer service) and inventory management. These skills are specific to a successful and profitable prepared food marketing effort.

Sanitation

Clean, neat and coordinated are descriptive words for a professional foodservice sanitation plan. Whether the customer can see the various kitchen preparation areas or not, all areas must be clean and coordinated. The sanitation plan should include color-coded buckets, such as green for cleaning solutions and red for sanitizers, test strips stored in a visible location and multiple hand wash sinks stocked with soap, paper towels and gloves. Chemicals should be in a system that measures the accurate amount for the task.

Cross-contamination of raw and cooked food is a major threat. Avoid establishing work areas where both raw and cooked meats, seafood and poultry are being processed simultaneously. Thoroughly wash, rinse and sanitize surfaces after contact with each raw product. Also, under no circumstances should shellfish or raw poultry be thawed or cleaned in the same area where produce is being processed.

Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free requests are on the rise in all markets. The people who make these dietary choices are doing it for a variety of reasons. Some are doing it for better health and it is considered dead in eight weeks. These are typically considered dead weight. How was this inventory procured? Will it ever be used again? Write a “daily special” today, use the inventory tomorrow and don’t reorder it.

Food waste

A restaurant cannot succeed with excessive food spoilage; everything must be used. Spoilage or waste not only includes the cost of food but all costs associated with preparation, packaging and cleaning. For example, a chef can reduce waste by using a blast chiller to properly cool unsold roasted chicken for salad or soup. The bones can be combined with vegetable ends and pieces to make a rich chicken soup stock in a kettle. Produce that is blemished and cannot be sold in the produce area can also be used for stews, soups or sauces.

Food consistency and quality

Consumers will not accept moderate-quality products for restaurant dining dollars. The offerings don’t have to be complicated, but they must be consistent in portion size, made with quality ingredients and be house-made if possible.

How about the front of the house? Establish rules to isolate utensils used with raw and cooked items.

How about the cashier? They can pull double duty, right? I say no; the easiest way to control cross-contamination is to eliminate the opportunity for it to occur. For a multitude of reasons, no one can make a noticeable difference with these costly ingredients, but they must be consistent in portion size, made with quality ingredients and be house-made if possible.

Consistently wash, rinse and sanitize surfaces with soap, paper towels and gloves. Chemicals should be in a system that measures the accurate amount for the task.

Another topic of interest addresses the specialty ice cream trend. The concept is to offer fresh flavored custards for specialty ice cream stores. Fruit juice mixes could also be available for sorbets and granitas. Here is how it works: the customer selects the desired flavored product from the cooler and then the instruction card for their flavor choice. The employee takes it home and cranks up the ice cream machine. Before you know it, they have a frozen “house-made” treat to delight their family or guests.

Feedback

Now that you have done all of this work, how do you know what your customers think? Do you call your message you can also provide a comment card. These have been somewhat effective in years past, but most people no longer take the time to fill out a card. In reality, we are in the digital age. Social media is very much a part of everyday life. An easy method of reaching out to your current customer base is to utilize loyalty program communications the store already has in place. Another thought is to use QR codes on products and signs and provide a link to learn about the product. In the message you can also provide a link to your feedback portal on your website.

In summary, the foodservice operation requires the same daily management and investment as a restaurant, so it should be treated in a professional manner. Remember the rewards can be double-digit margin, and good operations bring customers in the door for all of the products in the store. Cheers to good cooking and living!

Chef Michael Williams is director of culinary marketing-retail at Unified Brands. His foodservice career spans more than 30 years and includes a variety of experiences from strategic sourcing and culinary consulting to his most recent responsibility as product line director-cooking. Williams has worked domestically and internationally assisting culinary clients of all sizes to become more efficient in decision-making and creative in the approach to foodservice solutions.