

Foodservice Updates

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Earn points for experience

Consumers can be tough to please – and when you add higher menu costs, smaller portions and substitute ingredients to the mix as restaurants have had to do in recent months, it becomes extra challenging to try and win guests and retain them for the long term. But experience still counts for a lot – it’s what is making people choose restaurant meals over meals at home right now – and your restaurant can provide it in little (sometimes free) ways that pay off with guests. Consider how well you’re managing these parts of the restaurant experience: Be prompt with your greetings when people walk in the door. Offer water to guests waiting for a table and promptly collect drink orders from guests who are seated in your dining room. Encourage your staff to recommend dishes to guests – it demonstrates that they care about (and enjoy) the food they are serving and it presents your employee culture in a positive light. Take care with cleaning your dining area and restrooms. Leave people with a positive final impression by making your guests’ exit from your restaurant as smooth as possible – by allowing them to pay via QR code, or letting them split checks without fuss, for example. Finally, find ways to reconnect with them after they leave. That could be sending a loyalty program member an email on their birthday. Or, if a new guest provided their email address when making their reservation, follow up with a guest survey, an invitation to receive future offers, and maybe a free appetizer if they return to you within a few months.



Tech Talk

AI on the front lines?

Each month, artificial intelligence-powered tools are being adopted in more guest-facing restaurant roles. As a recent article in The Spoon put it, we will likely see the biggest use of this technology in quick-service roles, in particular, because they tend to be lower-paying, higher-turnover jobs. Wendy's and White Castle are two such brands stepping into this territory – and now delivery providers including Uber Eats and DoorDash also have plans in the works for AI-powered ordering. Once brands have established some history with guest-facing AI, we'll know more about how it is impacting order accuracy, labor challenges and the guest experience. If the changes are positive, restaurants beyond the quick-service category may well look for ways to weave it into their models too. Could you see a way to use chatbots or other AI tools to support your service?



When considering new tech, ask this question



Name a restaurant business challenge and there is a tech tool to help address it. As a result, it's easy for restaurants that have the means to invest in new tech to drown in a sea of options. Adopting new tech to help manage staff schedules sounds useful. Yet so do inventory management systems, tech-based staff training and kitchen display systems. If you can't do it all, focus on what's going to help elevate your brand by asking one question: How will this improve the hospitality we deliver? At the recent FSTEC Conference, restaurant CEOs reinforced this message. Gregg Majewski, CEO of Craveworthy Brands, said he has seen far too many operators get distracted from that goal. "Hospitality is key," he said. "It's how you win guests, and it's how you make your franchisees money."

Trends

Source some workhorse ingredients

According to research from Technomic, 85 percent of restaurant operators are concerned about high food costs. Separate research from Datassential found that 63 percent of operators say they could use some help in developing new dishes and menu ideas. If you look at the restaurant business environment right now, operators are being asked to do what can feel impossible: Labor is tight, skills are hard to come by, food costs are high, and yet consumers are still looking for new and exciting dishes fast. As a result, restaurant operators need to somehow work magic with the items they have in their inventory. Are your ingredients working as hard as they could? You're in a stronger position to do so if you have sauces, grains, pre-chopped vegetables and other items on hand that are cost-effective, can function across the menu and don't take a lot of time (or training) to prepare. Looking for ideas to expand your menu in efficient ways? The Scoop product line from US Foods provides some options to explore.



Mess outside = mess inside

You may run a pristine kitchen, but if the area outside your back door is a mess of piled-up trash and boxes that haven't been broken down, it's more likely that your kitchen management needs improvement. Consumers (not to mention inspectors) take note of these parts of your restaurant when evaluating its safety, so don't give them cause for concern. As the weather cools and rodents and other pests are looking for shelter, make sure you're not attracting them with food scraps or giving them places to hide outdoors.



#FoodSafety

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What does your staff reveal about your food safety?

Your staff knows what's happening behind the scenes of your restaurant – both the good and the bad. So if guests ask them what they think about a menu item – or if they would recommend it – and the employee hesitates to answer because they haven't tried the food or wouldn't eat it, guests might get a bad taste in their mouths before trying anything. So think of your staff as a pilot group of restaurant guests. If you can connect them with the food you serve, listen to their feedback and encourage them (through your safety practices) to trust the quality of your food, they can become strong front-line ambassadors of your brand.



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Creating a business model built to last

The pandemic created some strange conditions for running a restaurant business: Dining rooms became burdens that operators wanted to unload. Then, amid the high consumer demand for delivered food, ghost kitchens looked like the perfect solution, promising low overhead costs and efficient preparation. Now, it's become clear that ghost kitchens aren't the stand-alone powerhouses we once thought they could be – and they very much rely on the strength of their parent restaurant brand to succeed. As reported in Restaurant Business recently, the ghost kitchen provider Cloud-Kitchens is struggling to recruit restaurants into its facilities because the market has shifted in the past couple of years and operators aren't solely relying on delivery to generate business. In fact, they are realizing the benefits of having people in their dining rooms or at least onsite collecting their food. Is there a lesson anywhere here? Economic and environmental conditions have sent restaurants on a wild rollercoaster ride in the past few years. Just like the ingredients in your pantry, your business should have the ability to pivot in different directions based on shifting demand. That could mean harnessing technology to operate more leanly, scaling up areas of the business that can handle additional traffic and slowing down parts that can't. It could also mean rethinking your real estate and your team so their functions can also pivot with shifting demand. How flexible is your model? Is there room to reinvent it based on different scenarios?



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