

Foodservice Updates

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Take the temperature of your tech

In the past few years, restaurant operators have made countless consumer-facing, tech-based tweaks to make themselves more nimble in the face of a fast-evolving dining landscape: In came QR codes, ordering kiosks, app-based ordering and other low-touch tools to connect diners with restaurant meals. But the landscape is shifting yet again. Operators are now noticing that some of these tools have better staying power than others – and striking the right balance between low-touch and high-service requires being in tune with guests and possibly recalibrating your approach. According to a recent Forbes report, for example, QR codes, third-party delivery apps and ghost kitchens have been losing their luster. (A recent survey from US Foods confirmed that 76 percent of people prefer paper menus or in-person ordering to QR codes.) It may be about consumer fatigue over clunky QR code ordering interfaces, reluctance about paying a premium for delivery in what has been a high inflationary environment, and/or sentiment that the restaurant experience delivered by these tools doesn't feel as worthwhile as it could. Do you know, on a given day, how your guests are responding to the tools you offer to streamline your ordering experience – and how this compares with the previous week or month, for example? This is where your guest data can reveal patterns about what's working and where you need to make changes. For example, being able to pull up data that helps you identify key pivot points – like what price maximizes a menu item's profits without turning people away, and where your efforts at personalization are driving traffic – can help you use the tools you have on hand to make the experience you offer feel as worthwhile as possible.



Tech Talk

Harness tech to reinforce food safety lessons

Leaning on tech tools to deliver your food safety training isn't just more efficient – it can also set you up to make your training sink in for staff. Consider implementing tools that gamify your food safety lessons or at least make them more interactive for staff. Tech-based training can help you use different approaches to teaching that ensure you're delivering content in a way that reaches a range of learning styles. Finally, tech tools make it easier for you to make training a continuous process for your staff – not a one-and-done task but an ongoing, understood part of your culture. These platforms are dynamic and designed to help you deliver updates and new information better than a manual training system could.



Striking the right balance between high tech and human service



Amid the rise in labor costs and the difficulty of retaining labor altogether, it's understandable that more restaurants would be adopting technology to automate a wide range of tasks traditionally handled by people – or even for well-resourced brands to fully automate their prep lines. However, we're seeing some of the first signs of pushback from both terminated employees and disillusioned guests who are speaking out about the decline of human connection at restaurants. To be sure, most restaurants aren't going the way of robotic servers and line cooks. But as you automate more processes – particularly those that face the customer – consider what makes people want to work in restaurants and what makes the experience feel special for your guests. Find ways to retain the human touch (even indirectly) without sacrificing efficiency. Often, it's the interpersonal interactions that make a restaurant feel like a good place to work and to eat.

Trends

Go farther with speed-scratch ingredients

Speed-scratch foods can be a restaurant operator's best friend when labor is tight. Are you going as far with them on your menu as you can? While you should be more careful about cutting corners on your signature items, everything else on the menu is fair game for streamlining. Think par-baked breads, frozen items that need minimal cooking time, soups and stews that just need to be heated and served, pre-cut dessert portions, and dry mixes for baked goods or dry mix-ins that can elevate a wide range of sauces, dressings and marinades.



Cut out contamination

Your cutting boards can be sources of contamination if they're not cleaned and sanitized thoroughly – and according to the material they are made from. Broadly, you need to ensure the boards are scraped free of food particles, washed with warm, soapy water, rinsed, sanitized and then dried – either with a clean cloth or air-dried. The sanitizing step differs by the material of your board. For glass, plastic and stainless steel boards, State Food Safety advises sanitizing in the dishwasher or with an FDA-approved sanitizer for food contact surfaces. Marble boards should be sanitized by hand in a chlorine solution, while wooden boards are best sanitized in a quaternary ammonium-based sanitizer.



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Would you ever make this request?

It's Friday night and three of your staff have called in sick. When this happens, would you ever ask the person who seems the least sick to still come in...just for a couple of hours? It can be tempting for short-staffed restaurants to make such a request, but this can have significant consequences. According to Francine Shaw and Matthew Regusci, food safety experts who host a podcast about the topic, more than 40 percent of restaurant foodborne illness outbreaks are caused by employees coming to work sick. What's more, Shaw said only about 23 percent of restaurants have written policies in place telling employees not to come to work sick. As flu season approaches again, make sure you and your staff are clear on what symptoms should prevent them from coming to work. Some symptoms are clearer than others. Vomiting and diarrhea are among the clearer ones. But how about a sore throat, mild fever or bad cold? Make sure your policy is clear – and don't be afraid to tell customers that their order may take a little longer because you're short-staffed due to illness. Explain that you're just trying to keep them safe.



Foodservice Updates

Make new dishes feel comfortably adventurous to guests

Offering what feels like a worthwhile experience to guests is important at U.S. restaurants, particularly as restaurant inflation continues to outpace grocery store inflation. One way restaurants are approaching this is through menu innovation. According to new research from Datassential, only 16 percent of restaurant operators are not planning to change their menus this year. Making updates can boost the intrigue of your restaurant and make dining out (or ordering out) an easier decision for people. But as you innovate, it's important to find ways to make the new dishes tempting by relating them to something familiar. For example, according to Datassential, a growing number of Latin American restaurants are enticing American guests to try birria by describing it as a twist on the French dip sandwich – an American favorite that also feels experiential because of the dipping involved. The Latin American approach, on some menus, involves quesadillas or tacos served with a brothy soup for dipping instead of a beefy sandwich served with au jus. So a dish that could feel adventurous (but maybe a little out of reach) to a guest feels comfortably adventurous because of the connection to a French dip. As you innovate your menu this year, consider your menu favorites. What dishes could be appealing templates for introducing the new flavor profiles that upgrade the experience you offer?



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