

BOOTHS, TABLES, AND CHAIRS ... OH MY!

You look sharp! You are all decked out and ready to celebrate a special birthday with your significant other and a few friends by spending an evening on the town. Your evening starts with dinner at a restaurant featuring an award-winning menu and a three month waiting list. You arrive early, part of a party of six, only to find a waiting room full of people and are promptly quoted a ninety-minute wait time despite your reservation. As you peek beyond the host(ess) you see an empty dining room. The combination doesn't make sense.

Upon re-examination of the dining area, you realize that all of the empty seats are four person booths. The waiting room, conversely, consists of parties of two and six – no parties of four. Now it makes sense. The seating layout is the cause for your delay, as well as lost revenue for the restaurant. By considering six key factors when designing the seating layout – *capacity, flexibility, efficiency, aesthetics, function, and comfort* – this problematic scenario could have been avoided.

Capacity, Flexibility, and Efficiency

With regards to seating layouts, *capacity* refers to the total number of available seats, while *flexibility* refers to the ability to change the number of seats at each “table.” As demonstrated by the example above, these two factors work together to determine your seating *efficiency*. Let's say that you have a party of two, a party of six, and two available four-person booths. Even though there are eight people and eight seats, you will only be able to seat the party of two. The party of six will have to wait for a different table to become available. Furthermore, the party of two is sitting at a booth for four, leaving two seats in that booth unused and reducing your seating efficiency. In this scenario, the seating efficiency is 25% (eight seats available, two patrons seated). If a flexible configuration was utilized, the eight seats could have been broken up into a table for two and a table for six, resulting in a seating efficiency of 100%.

Aesthetics and Function

While a certain amount of flexibility is desirable, there is no need for every seat to be fully flexible, as it could negatively impact the *aesthetics*, *function*, and *seating capacity* of the facility. Aesthetically, the dining room is where the patron spends a majority of their dining experience. Given the number of tables in chairs or booths in the dining room, these components can significantly impact the look of the space. Functionally, the number of tables in each station, the configuration of the seating area, aisles widths, and numerous other factors will determine whether or not the space is easy to use.

Comfort

Comfort is a key component of the dining room, both physically and psychologically. The desired service level and anticipated turn time (short or long) will help determine the appropriate level of seating comfort required. A quick service facility seeking a twenty-minute turn will not want to provide seats that encourage lounging and extended stays. Conversely, a fine dining restaurant would need to make sure that the guest is comfortable, as an uncomfortable seat can ruin the entire dining experience.

The psychological comfort of the dining guest should also receive proper attention. For example, in many scenarios numerous smaller dining areas are more inviting than a single, large, open dining area. There is an inherent desire for patrons to anchor against an object and look out at the dining room, rather than sit at a table in the middle of the dining room feeling as though they are on display. The numerous spaces also serve a functional purpose, allowing the dining room to fill up section by section. This approach can make an otherwise empty dining room feel full and is more efficient for servicing the guest. The subject of psychological comfort is so large that it cannot be fully addressed in this column. Considering and addressing the issue, however, is vital.

Seating Solutions

There are an infinite number of solutions that can be used to develop a well designed seating layout. While we cannot discuss every possible solution in this month's column, I thought it would be appropriate to share a few techniques that can improve the usefulness of any seating facility.

1. A Banquette, a configuration that utilizes bench seating on one side of a table and a chair on the other, offers tremendous flexibility. If the tables are easily movable, they can be slid together or broken up, as the seating demand requires.
2. Divide the typical four-top table into two tables that can be slid together with neighboring tables or apart to offer additional seating configurations.
3. Utilize tables that have the same dimensions, so that they may be easily nested together. This includes the coordination of booth tables and free-standing tables. This practice will increase your optional table configurations.
4. Booths can be used when space is at a premium, as they do not require space between seats that are back to back. Rather, the booth seats are fixed and abut one another. This configuration requires a smaller footprint than traditional table and chair layouts.

The best dining room layouts balance these six factors: *capacity, flexibility, efficiency, aesthetics, function, and comfort*. The possible solutions are endless. Overlooking these issues during the planning phase, however, can impact the performance of the facility over the life of the project, not to mention the guest's experience. Did you really need a ninety-minute wait to start your evening on the town? It could have been avoided ... with a better seating layout.