

FOR TRUE CREATIVITY, START WITH SILLY

On a recent trip to Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom, I stood at the front of the ferry with my son who is two years old. Usually, we take the monorail, but this time decided to take the ferry for a change of pace. Throughout the ferry ride, we both gazed wide-eyed in amazement despite the number of times we have been to the park. My son was fixated on Cinderella's castle. Me, I couldn't take my eyes off of the Contemporary Resort. This facility has been open for decades, but I just can't get enough of it.

If you have never seen the Contemporary Resort, it is a special place. In addition to the architectural and interior design elements, there is one feature that is absolutely fantastic. The monorail that services the Magic Kingdom runs right through the hotel. I mean in one end and out the other! From outside, to inside, and back outside again. As dramatic as this feature is, remarkably there are three totally different ways to partake in this experience. First, you can ride the train through the hotel, experiencing the shift between interior and exterior spaces. Second, you can stand within the hotel and watch the train pierce through the building. And third, you can view the transition from a distance, watching the monorail disappear and then suddenly re-appear.

Guts and Gambling

Sure, there are more dramatic spaces on this planet, but one has to appreciate the innovative thinking that occurred in order to create this unique experience. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall at the meeting where this concept was proposed. With numerous interested parties gathered around a table waiting to hear what this new hotel property would include, the idea is actually proposed to run a train through a building ... on purpose! Sounds silly, and it is. That's why I say that sometimes you have to start with silly to truly achieve maximum creativity.

Not to be overlooked in this process is the system that allowed such a silly idea to be embraced. How many organizations would have looked at the same idea

and laughed it off. “You wanna do what?” Once the laughter subsides, too many organizations would have moved on to the next idea. But in the culture that Disney created, the idea was seized and brought to reality. Sure, it is a gamble and certainly not the easiest option. There were significant, additional costs and time involved to develop solutions to unique problems. But here I am, writing about the facility decades later. For true creativity, sometimes you have to start with silly.

Silliness Applied

Ok, so this all sounds great ... but how does it affect you? As discussed in previous installments of this column, every foodservice establishment has the opportunity to create an environment in which the diner’s experience occurs. The design of this environment is a tremendous opportunity to exert your silliness. Whether it involves the design and construction of a new facility, or renovations or modifications to an existing facility, silly ideas can be born and applied.

The best way to start the process of developing these silly concepts is through a true brainstorming session. Pick a place to go that is inspiring, relaxing, personally significant ... what ever works for you. Make an effort to get out of your every day world and into a fresh, new environment. Some of you may want to bring a companion along ... two legs, four legs, or more, it doesn’t matter. Others may wish to be alone. Regardless of which you prefer, begin to look at your surroundings and question as many “givens” as possible. If you are outdoors, on the banks of a river in the Rocky Mountains, start contemplating a mountain that is upside down. Think about the possibility of the river rocks floating on top of the river instead of sitting at the bottom. Imagine trees that are growing in the form of a “T” and in circle formations. Let your mind wander aimlessly to get the creative juices flowing.

Once the creativity is there, now start to shift your mind back towards your facility and question the “givens” in that environment. Think like Dr. Seuss. Eventually you will find some opportunities for silly ideas that will lead to unprecedented

creativity. And, perhaps, I will be writing about your idea(s) in the months to come.

Tangible Examples

Not every idea has to be a train through a building; don't discount the small ones. I know this all sounds a bit hokey and that you are looking for some tangible examples, so I will toss in a few. On a recent project that featured a display kitchen, the chef of the restaurant had requested that the cooking be on the outside display kitchen area instead of back to back in the center, which is more traditional. After several generations, this concept was achieved and featured counter style seating facing the kitchen, and cooking lines that allows the culinary staff to face the guest.

In another example, there was discussion about the expediter being the heartbeat of the operation, much like the conductor of an orchestra. Building on this one idea, a layout that looked much like an orchestra was proposed. The expediter was given a station in the center and the cooking lines wrapped around this station in a graduated "U" shape. *Maestro's* seemed to be a perfect name and influence for additional silliness.

Conclusion

Take some time, take a step back, and start thinking silly. Challenge yourself to question the "givens" in your environment. Keep in mind, however, that idea generation is only part of the process. Embracing an idea, no matter how silly, and allowing a full exploration before dismissing it is essential for success.