

SET UP YOUR SERVERS FOR SUPER SERVICE

When you get right down to the basics of any design effort for a foodservice establishment, the same objective exists with each and every project: *design an efficient and effective system to prepare and deliver food and beverage to the guest*. That's it. Nothing too fancy. But it is much easier said than done.

In previous columns, I have focused heavily on design techniques within the back-of-house. But design techniques in the front-of-house, specifically those related to service, are equally dependent on both design and execution.

Unfortunately, many overlook the importance of design as part of the service equation, and attribute the service performance almost exclusively to operational execution. In this column, we will take a look at some front-of-house design techniques that can help promote quality service. To clarify, I want to focus on the functional aspect of the front-of-house, not the aesthetics. Although good design cannot ensure good service, bad design will almost always result in bad service.

Designing for Service: The Basics

One of the primary rules in designing an efficient front-of-house is to make sure that the service staff meets the kitchen team (cooks, dish washers, etc.) where ever necessary, but they never cross paths. Any conflicting flow patterns, where the movement of back-of-house and front-of-house staff overlap, are disasters waiting to happen. Accidents, employee injury, breakage, slower service, and lower morale are all potential outcomes. Design should start with the general flow patterns of both food and product. When travel patterns are used as the basis of the overall layout, these potential "danger zones" are reduced or completely eliminated.

Another important rule of thumb in designing for effective service requires the designer to study the service sequence. The steps of service should be identified and used as a guide for the front-of-house planning and design effort. Common activities for servers include order entry, food pick-up, food delivery, beverage service, bussing (in some cases), and drop-off at ware washing.

Consolidating the areas associated with these functions will help reduce the distance of travel. All necessary support equipment, ranging from coffee brewers to refrigeration, must be grouped together wherever possible. Reducing the distance of travel promotes efficient service and frees up time for the server to spend in support of their guests. The ability for a server to move easily between these functions, in any order, will result in better service.

Positioning Your POS System(s)

While the points listed above are what I consider to be the basics of designing for efficient service, there are other design techniques that, when implemented, can further enhance the service system. First, let's look at the point of sale (POS) location(s). When a POS system is located near the food pick-up area, it requires servers to walk by the food pick-up window on a regular basis. This promotes more frequent food delivery, as a manager or expediter will ask servers to run food in the window whether it is for their tables or not. This scenario encourages a team environment, with servers learning to look out for one another.

Another school of thought is that the POS terminals should be located remotely, closer to the dining room. When this occurs, the servers can enter orders and "fire" their next courses quickly. It tends to promote better management of the dining experience, and often provides the server a greater level of control. There is, of course, the possibility of combining these two theories and locating POS systems in both locations – near the food pick-up window and in the dining rooms, depending on the number of POS systems required.

Though they have been on the market for several years now, wireless POS entry devices (often a modified PDA) are becoming more attractive with better durability, greater capabilities, and lower costs. When a wireless POS entry system is installed, each server is provided with a wireless device that they can use to manage their orders – enter, fire, and in some cases close out checks and accept credit cards. I will be honest. I did not fully understand the impact of these wireless systems until I experienced them myself, first hand. What they

really do is ensure a well timed dining experience. Let me share with you an example of what I mean.

Assume for a moment that a server has two 4-top tables, both of which are full. The first table is in the midst of enjoying their appetizers while the second is just beginning to place their order. The server, however, stumbles upon an indecisive patron who can't seem to make up his mind. Our server, who does not want to be rude, is forced to remain engaged with the guest while he makes up his mind when an offer to return in a few minutes is rejected. At the very same time, our server notices that her other table is now finishing their appetizers and will soon be ready for their entrées. She needs to fire the next course, but can't break free. With a normal POS station, the server would remain at the mercy of our indecisive guest. When a wireless POS entry system is implemented, however, the server is able to multi-task. She can fire the next round of entrées for her second table without ever breaking a connection with the indecisive patron at the first table. The service steps are seamless, and the guest is completely unaware. Overall service quality is improved. Though there are other attractive features of these wireless devices, their impact on the pace of service seems to be the most impressive.

Transparent Service

Transparency is typically the goal of food and beverage service. Think about it. If the guest has everything that they need, then they really won't have to engage their server during the course of a meal except perhaps to answer the obligatory "how is everything?" question. From a design perspective, there are some techniques that we can use to assist with this transparency. Consider service stations in the dining room. When located and configured properly, the server can keep an eye out on their patrons without appearing to hover. Also, the type of equipment located in these service stations can impact the guest's experience. Is there a coffee brewer, or just a warmer for coffee brewed elsewhere in the restaurant? What are the sight and sound impacts that this equipment will have on the dining environment?

In the dining room, the seating configuration will create the aisles and passages used by the servers to travel throughout the restaurant. These aisles are an incredibly important component of the service function. When I design a seating layout, I always work to ensure that there are two ways in or out of any part of the dining room, whenever possible. This prevents traffic jams and allows the servers to move more freely through the dining room. It also helps with service transparency, as servers are better able to maneuver around guests that may be in the way.

Finally, there is a technique that I use to design service bar stations that again is based in this idea of transparency. Remote, dedicated service bars are great, but require space and labor that many operations simply cannot afford. As a result, many bar service stations are physically connected to a main bar. In most cases, however, the pick-up station is directly adjacent to customer seating, inevitably exposing the customer to banter by the service staff that is often inappropriate. At best this is intrusive and distracting. At worst this is extremely offensive and off-putting to the guest. To combat this scenario, I strive to create a physical separation between the guest and service area. In some cases, I am even able to tie the bar pick-up area to a service station. This has been a successful tactic, especially in country clubs, where members will want to linger at the bar. A service bar and pick-up window can be located on the back of the bar to completely separate the service function from the guest's experience.

Any of these simple techniques can greatly improve the quality of service in your foodservice establishment. If quality service is expected, then the front-of-house must be designed to support each step in the service sequence. Take a few minutes to analyze your facility and see if you are set up for great service.