

FLEXIBILITY: THE ULTIMATE TREND IN HOSPITALITY DESIGN

Quite rapidly, it seems that our global society has adopted a common trait – we want what we want, when we want it. Yesterday’s amenities, which provided added benefits to the guest experience, have quickly evolved into today’s expectations. The internet, e-mail, on-demand movies and television programming, satellite radio, and general pace of life have all impacted the way that we live our lives – and the way that we expect those providing services deemed essential to support our new lifestyles. There are few industries which have been impacted by these new expectations as significantly as the hospitality industry. In fact, I believe that the need for flexibility may have become the single most dominant trend in hospitality design, as it allows or limits the ability for operators to address other trends that appear on the horizon. After all, doesn’t the facility typically outlive most trends that come and go?

What Meal Periods?

I have written about the topic of flexibility in the past, but my focus at that time was on the equipment and infrastructure which continue to limit the ability of foodservice operators to respond to guest demands. Over the past several years, however, I have noticed that this need for flexibility within foodservice facilities is permeating the entire facility, from the back-of-house to the front-of-house and every area in between. Meal periods have evolved into a free form and less rigid format, blurred to accommodate our hectic daily lives.

Those in the industry often use the term “day-parts” to describe the timing opportunities within an average day when customers may utilize the foodservice venues. The traditional breakfast, lunch, and dinner day-parts have long since been joined by their new peers. There is no better example than Taco Bell’s recently coined “Fourth Meal.” It is a brilliant marketing strategy which defines a new late night meal period. Thirty years ago, the concept of a late night meal period would have seemed farfetched, whereas today it is a reality. Similarly, for some concepts, the periods between breakfast and lunch, and between lunch and dinner, have emerged as independent opportunities that in many cases have

resulted in customized menus and unique service offerings. Operators who have carefully studied and adapted to the new demands of a more flexible and demanding society have turned downtime within their foodservice operations into independent revenue generating day-parts.

Overcoming Physical Limitations

The ability for an operator to recognize this trend, and the desire to capitalize upon such opportunities, are wonderful first steps – but frustration often sets in when the facility becomes a key limiting factor. Though the desire may be there, the physical plant in many cases prevents the operator from following through on initial intentions. For this reason, I have noticed (and proposed) an increased focus on the flexibility of foodservice facilities – especially in the front-of-house guest areas – during renovation and new construction projects over the past several years.

If you are a frequent reader of my columns, then you know that I am not a fan of dropping abstract ideas and running away. On the contrary. I make it a priority to provide specific examples. I want you to have something tangible to take away with you when you are done reading this installment. So, here you are – a series of ideas to demonstrate the kind of flexibility to which I am referring. Some of these are concepts we have developed for our clients. Others are ones that I have seen implemented successfully by other designers. Hopefully, these ideas – or others that they inspire – will help you increase the flexibility of your foodservice facility.

- I once saw a facility designed with mobile half-walls. It as an open room, sub-divided with a series of half-height partitions which, once “released” from their secured position, would pop up on casters and wheel off to a storage room. It was a very clever design.
- All Day Dining restaurants in many resorts have long been a problem. During the breakfast period, a buffet is desired. However, the buffet is out of place and often “abandoned” during the other day-parts. The all too common answer to this dilemma is to shove the buffet in a corner and

close it off when not in use. This is a mediocre solution at best. We have developed a design concept for some of our clients that allows the space to convert from a buffet space in the morning to a brasserie style visible kitchen with a community dining table in the evenings.

- Consider using a variety of non-permanent “elements” to divide a space. These may include curtains, furniture, plants, flooring, ceiling details, or other comparable design components to help provide definition within a space.
- What about wall finishes or artwork that actually change from one day-part to the next? It is possible.
- I recently toured a hotel that incorporated semi-enclosed spaces in the corridors outside their meeting space which acted as a warm area for coffee breaks as well as impromptu meetings between colleagues. The space was oval in shape, but open on two sides to the adjacent corridors. Because of the design, this space was extremely versatile.
- I often see private dining rooms that are designed only for a single purpose and, as a result, spend a significant portion of the time empty and unused. An alternative solution would be to create a private dining space that could handle private functions, but seamlessly open up to the adjacent areas and serve as usable space at other times, when not in use for its primary function.
- If you are engaged in a new construction or renovation project, be sure to include utilities (i.e. electrical outlets, water connections, etc.) wherever possible. This will enable you to add temporary stations or permanent expansions throughout the facility.

We have all learned that change is the only constant in life. Similarly, I believe that the need for flexibility in foodservice facilities to support trends that come and go is the one trend that is here to stay.