

AWAITING TABLES

Humans, by nature, are creatures of habit. Most members of our species have a natural resistance to change, whether they like to admit it or not. One of the unfortunate side effects of this quality is the acceptance of the status quo. There are many aspects of daily operations that are taken as a given, and accepted by both the operator and patron. It doesn't have to be that way. This month, we will examine one of these missed opportunities – the waiting area. With a little thought and planning, this missed opportunity can be transformed from a weakness into a strength ... and result in increased profits.

In the Beginning

When an operation first opens, the primary concern is filling the dining room (can also be stated as *butts in seats*). Forecasts, projections and the like are great, but there is understandable angst regarding potential failure when an establishment first opens. Fast forward ... your operation is a success and now you have warm bodies in both the dining room and the waiting area. But what do you do with your waiting patrons? Too often, especially when a dining establishment is located in a retail area, I see the host(ess) hand a patron a coaster or pager and send them off. Yes, they ask them to leave and come back later! Let me get this straight – the patron that was drawn to your establishment by marketing efforts and reputation is not only *allowed* to leave the premises, but *encouraged* to do so? What a tremendous marketing opportunity blown! The patron's wait is part of the dining experience, and should be treated with equal consideration and planning. During a design or renovation process, consider how you can capitalize on this marketing opportunity. The pertinence of these examples will vary based on the individual operation, but the concepts may prove useful.

The Bar

The industry's time honored waiting venue is the bar. Assuming that your patron likes smoke, has no children, and wants a drink, it is perfect. Based on current

demographical shifts, it is not likely to be a desirable location to wait for a vacant table. More importantly, it could offer a negative start to the dining experience. If approached in a creative manner, the bar area can be an interesting and enjoyable experience. Too often, however, the bar is used as the easy way out and offers nothing to frame the dining experience.

Extension of the Dining Room

Some establishments have begun offering appetizers in the waiting area. This approach has numerous benefits. First, customers typically go to a dining establishment to eat – they are hungry. Feeding them sooner rather than later will keep them occupied and content. Second, dining in the waiting area provides additional seating and reduces the average turn time for a table, resulting in a significant increase in potential revenue.

Merchandising

Merchandising is a great option. Why send your customers, and their money, elsewhere to purchase goods and services? Consider offering a shopping experience that will not only appeal to your customer base, but also support the theme and objectives of the operation. Private labeled food products, seasonings consistent with the cuisine, specialty cooking utensils, and gadgets, amongst other items of interest, can be offered. Doing so will provide an additional source of potential revenue and profit.

Entertainment

The wait before a meal is an integral part of the dining experience, and can significantly impact the patron. The ideas proposed above require the patrons to entertain themselves. The dining establishment can, however, take entertainment into its own hands. This is yet another marketing opportunity. For example, a display cooking station in the waiting area can be utilized to demonstrate preparation methods for the evening's special. This would offer an opportunity for interaction between your staff and customers, occupy the guests during their wait, provide educational advice, and likely result in an increase in

sales of the prepared item. This approach could be taken one step further by offering recipe cards that include the dining establishment's logo and address. If live entertainment is not desirable or possible, consider presenting specialty television programming that is pertinent to your concept. Putting on the football game (as much as I love football) doesn't always cut it.

Conclusion

If properly conceived in the design or renovation process, the waiting area can be configured to help set the tone for an enjoyable dining experience. Utilizing some of the ideas presented above may even result in additional profits. Try looking at the waiting *process*, both the physical space and agenda, with a fresh set of eyes. If you do, you are likely to discover a number of missed opportunities.