

## **Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?**

I have a fear of heights. Perhaps the last thing that you would ever find me doing is walking a tightrope in mid-air, attempting to balance myself and prevent a plummet to my certain demise. Interestingly enough, however, I find myself in this position nearly every day ... metaphorically. In my profession, I am forever walking an ever-thinning fine line to please both my current and future clients in the same facility. How is this you ask? Well, I find that I must strive to design in such a manner as to give my clients what they want, or what they believe they want, in the present without limiting the facility's ability to provide them with what they may want in the future. This can be extremely difficult at times.

### Who's the Boss?

At the outset of every design project, I strive to evaluate the entire development team to the best of my ability. In certain instances, the owner and the operator are one in the same. In others, they are separate entities, and may have different goals. Typically, when the owner and operator is the same individual, the operation is more clearly defined at the outset, and layouts are created to match the design objectives with the available space. It is my obligation to raise future considerations that might impact the current design approach. Such issues might include new technology or planning for potential growth. In this scenario, feedback is typically timely and straightforward – the ideas are either accepted or rejected, and then the design process moves on.

In an instance where the operator and owner are not the same, the complexity of this process increases exponentially. It does not matter whether they are members of the same company or not – when the owner and operator are not the same individual, there frequently is a difference in opinion as to what is desired or required. It is here, within the midst of these often heated discussions, that I find myself executing my balancing act. The challenge is simple ... how do you manage to provide both parties what they want, even when their desires are not always in agreement, and still consider future implications of the design at the

same time? And while the challenge is clear, the answer can be a bit more elusive.

### Two Rights Can Make A Wrong

First, you may wonder why I choose to mediate these battles when letting the team fight it out is much easier for me personally. Well, here is my logic. First, and this should come as no real surprise, the foodservice industry has a fairly high turnover rate. As a result, the operator involved in the design process frequently “moves on” before the facility is completed and opens for business. Second, the design of hospitality facilities is much like interior design – there is no one right answer. There is one main difference in this similarity, however ... it is a lot easier to change out window coverings than it is to relocate floor sinks or electrical conduit. For this reason, the decisions made relative to the layout of the facility must consider both immediate and long term (even if only potential) needs of the operation.

I have learned to deal with the variety of opinions expressed by operators. On several occasions I have seen two operators, both well respected and experienced, review a facility’s configuration and reach completely opposite conclusions. The first would indicate that the facility was the best he had ever seen, and suited his needs perfectly. The second would feel quite strongly that the designer would be better off in another career - such as selling shoes. You can imagine that this clear difference in opinion, based greatly in personal preference, can make my job quite difficult at times. As I have stated in previous installments of this column, anything will work ... it is just a matter of how well.

I am hopeful that through this explanation, you will better understand how your design team should approach these situations. Throughout the design process, I am forced to balance what will work for the current operator as well as any potential future operators. If I feel that the facility is being custom tailored too greatly to one operator’s methodology, I may try and steer the process back towards a more universal solution. This is not to say that the current operator’s input is not valuable or that I am not open to exploring new and creative

solutions... on the contrary. The operator is an invaluable resource and typically generates input utilized to develop the final design solution. However, it is important to make sure that if and when another operator takes the helm that they can work efficiently in the space, even if their operation is run under an entirely different system. This is not always the most popular approach, but it is the responsibility of those in my profession to act in the client's best interest ... to be the client's advocate.

### Future Flexibility

More money, per square foot, is spent in the kitchen of a foodservice facility than in any other area. As such, kitchen renovations can be extremely expensive and are often delayed, even when a new operator comes aboard and requests changes. One way to appease both the current and potential future owners is through the advanced planning and configuration of utility provisions. Equipment can easily be purchased and installed. The hang-ups, however, usually come with the utility provisions.

During the initial planning phase, consider the number and location of floor sinks knowing that some of the equipment might move around over time. Investigate such possibilities as overlapping fire suppression systems that do not require expensive reconfiguration of the fire system when equipment is shuffled. Realize that the use of a utility chase wall, with access panels, may allow for less-expensive future modifications. Provide additional capacity in the electrical, plumbing, and gas systems. These are just a few examples of possible approaches.

There is one example that supports this theory quite well. One of our projects (a hotel with 1200 rooms and 200,000 square feet of meeting space) had a change in management. The new team wanted to completely reconfigure all of the banquet kitchens. Because of proper planning, the requested change was accommodated with a four-figure price tag, not a six-figure price tag. There are a number of solutions that, with the proper planning, can increase the useful life of the facility and save money in the long term. So, when you embark on your next

project, consider both the current and potential implications of the decisions that you are making.