

FURTHER EXPLORING FLEXIBILITY

I seem to have hit a chord with my last installment, *The Kitchen Evolution*, by introducing the concept of flexibility in commercial kitchens ... or the current lack thereof. I received the largest response from readers of the column to date, who wrote to me in search of more specific information, examples, and insight on the subject. Given this response, I wanted to take the time to further explore this concept of flexibility.

Current Limitations

Before one can truly understand the need for flexibility in commercial foodservice facilities, the limitations of our every day kitchen environment must first be fully understood ... and this is not easily done. Most foodservice operators share a common, distinctive personality trait – a “get it done” attitude. Nothing can stand in the way of a true operator when there is a deadline on the horizon. The main ingredient for tonight’s main course didn’t show up ... and there are 500 guests expected in six hours? The POS system is down? No problem. They know how to improvise. They have mastered the art. This very same personality trait, however, can sometimes be a hindrance. Because overcoming obstacles is part of an operator’s every day job description, they typically do not have the luxury of taking a step back and looking at what *could* be. They are immersed in what *is*, and do not waste time dreaming of perfect scenarios. There are crises to solve and fires to put out.

I would like to encourage some of these operators – in between crises, of course – to objectively consider the typical kitchen environment for just a moment. I am not necessarily referring to the layout, but rather the components within the layout or the pieces of the puzzle – the equipment. Now, take a hard look at the equipment we currently use every day and ask a simple question ... is the equipment working around you, or are you working around the equipment. My hunch is that you will find the latter to be the case more often than not.

I would argue that the current equipment commonly utilized in commercial kitchens often limits the menu, the service capabilities, and ultimately the

profitability of the operation. Kitchen space is extremely valuable and needs to be used more efficiently. I recently spoke with the director of design for a major restaurant chain, and he told me that if he could simply reduce the length of his cooking line by six feet, it would open up an entire new market for his concept. The limiting factor in his mind? The equipment ... hands down. He was forced to base his design on the equipment that currently exists, whether it suited his needs or not.

Though we as an industry accept the current equipment options as a given, I firmly believe that there are pieces of equipment, even categories of equipment, that have not yet been explored, and which loom on the horizon. These new, more flexible pieces of equipment would impact the way that we set up stations throughout the kitchen, perhaps even allowing simple modifications for different day parts. They would have a beneficial impact on labor. They would reduce the initial development costs, while simultaneously lowering ongoing operation and maintenance costs. Most importantly, this new equipment would positively impact profitability. Does this sound too good to be true? It's not. These adaptable, flexible pieces of equipment may be just around the corner.

Examples of Flexibility

Let's say that you own and operate a 150 seat restaurant that has recently been granted the right to add 45 outside dining seats, which you expect to be very popular with your guests. In reviewing your facility, you find that the cooking line, service stations, rest rooms and other key components of the restaurant will be able to adequately handle the increase in volume. However, there is one exception – the ware washing area. The dish tables are sufficient, but the single tank dish machine just won't cut it anymore. You need a larger machine with greater capacity. So here is my contention with our current logic ... why must you get rid of the existing, perfectly functional machine and replace it with a larger model? Why can't the machine adapt with your operation? Why can't you purchase a module that you can add on to your existing machine? The equipment should adapt to you, not the other way around.

This concept of flexibility can be applied throughout the production areas. Perhaps the storage area can be modified by season, as the types of products stored may change during the course of the year. What if you want to add a sink to an existing work table? How about the chef's counter? I *know* that operators want flexibility in one of the most important production areas in the kitchen. Menus may change over time, by season, or even by day part ... shouldn't the kitchen facility have the same capability? Such changes could include an increase in refrigerated storage during certain seasons where products are received fresh, and greater frozen storage during other parts of the year.

It is my belief that foodservice equipment manufacturers, as a whole, do not give operators the "palate with which to paint." Current equipment choices are too limiting, and operators are forced to work with these limitations. Thus, we find ourselves in the position which we are in today with little new product innovation and operators that must work around the equipment offerings manufacturers have brought to the marketplace, whether it is right for their operation or not.

The Unfortunate Reality

Profit margins for those who manufacture, represent, distribute and sell foodservice equipment have steadily declined for decades. Looking at the equipment manufacturers specifically, these lower margins have significantly limited their research and development efforts, as is evidenced by the remarkably low number of new products introduced every year. Think for a moment about the last "new" piece of equipment that positively impacted your operation. Again, I am willing to bet that those impacts are few and far between. Though there are the exceptions, as a whole, manufacturers of foodservice equipment are a conservative, fairly reactive group. Many of them are now owned by large conglomerates that must answer to shareholders and are often more concerned about their stock performance than innovation or investing in the future. This only further limits the potential for the development of new, more flexible equipment that will better serve the industry and which could change the way that kitchens operate. These evolutionary possibilities are so close, yet so far away

at the same time. If we rely on the manufacturers to develop these new pieces of equipment on their own, we may never see this next generation of equipment.

Think outside of the proverbial box and evaluate your kitchen environments.

Dream with me for a moment and see if you can conjure up ideas for new equipment, or modifications to existing equipment, that do not yet exist but would positively impact your operation. I see equipment that will be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the operation, even as it evolves over time. This is what I refer to as the Kitchen Evolution. I am challenging the entire industry to consider what *could be*, without being hindered by what is. Take a minute to dream with me. It will be worth your time.