

The Waterpark Food Facility:



Most managers might not admit it, but food and beverage (f/b) is the trickiest of departments to run within the park, mainly because it is the most misunderstood. Even in the early stages of blueprints, the box labeled "Kitchen" remains a blank until the eleventh hour, ultimately not getting the attention it deserved with respect to layout and concept. This article is an introductory roadmap for navigating f/b, whether it is in the planning stages of a new complex or in an established preparation area; the beauty of a seasonal industry is that every May/June is a renewed chance to start fresh.

Everything starts with the menu. The operation's menu determines what production, service and managerial responsibilities must be met. The menu itself is a result of marketing efforts designed to identify the wants and needs of the guest. "You can't be everything to everyone," is a cliché, but it certainly fits for the waterpark menu. If adults are a small fraction of total attendance, loading up a menu with fare perceived as healthy (like salads) is likely to result in throwing out a lot of food.

The cornerstone for any decent kitchen design is to know the ramifications of the menu, the equipment needed to execute the menu and the square footage available that will influence patterns of workflow. It is undesirable to have people running into each other while they try to do their job. It is also preferable to have them take as few steps as possible to do the work.

When it comes to kitchens, size is overrated. There have been some 500-square-foot gems designed as well as a few 2000-sq.-ft. turkeys. A detail as minute as which way a refrigerator door opens can influence an employee's performance and speed of service. Storage is also an important issue. Since many businesses are accustomed to multiple deliveries each week, storage capacity can be improperly estimated in the planning phase. Cubic footage should be as important an issue as square footage. Too much storage space can create a dumping ground for junk and other stuff that no one seems to know what to do with. In other words, the luxury of excess space has the uncanny effect of allowing things to accumulate, including overstocked food and drink.

Everyone agrees that a small space, such as a snack bar or concession stand, has an unusually big "demand" for utilities, including gas, electricity and water. Changing the plumbing or electrical after the facility is built can be a deal-killer or delay remodeling for years. To avoid this future obstacle, even the most basic of new snack bars should be "overbuilt" from the standpoint of utilities, perhaps by as much as one-third. The cost of bigger pipes (water and gas) and a bigger electrical box (more amps available) to service any future equipment needs or additions is a smart investment.

The menu concept will also dictate per caps, or the average amount spent by park attendees (not everyone eats.) As examples, a snack bar menu of sodas, chips, cookies and candies might generate a 50 cents per cap; adding hot dogs boosts that number to \$1.00 per cap. Breaking into the \$2 per cap strata usually means the addition of sandwiches and/or grilled foods such as hamburgers and chicken sandwiches.

Grilling indoors means the installation of a hood. For a facility with a bather load of less than 1,500, the expense may be prohibitive. The alternative is to grill outdoors. Nothing says summer like barbecue. Health departments take a special interest (and rightly so) in this process; refrigeration and food-handling procedures are valid concerns. But a smaller facility can still elevate the food experience by planning a smart grill set-up outside the main f/b building.

As the bather load increases up to 2,500, the next concept worth investigating is pizza. Having the pies imported from a local pizzeria is convenient and may pack some punch in the "branding" department, but if the facility has the space and budget to do its own pizza, the profit revenue potential is nothing short of staggering. The cost of goods could be as low as 20 percent if done in-house. Do the math on a slice selling for \$2.50.

More waterparks than ever are getting hip to the concept of group sales and the f/b catering that goes hand in glove with this type of outing. According to *World Waterpark Magazine*™, Wild Island in Nevada generates 35 percent of the waterpark's revenue from group picnics (no one can reserve a picnic area without purchasing food.) Not unlike the hotel industry, catered events signify food and labor cost margins that are much more profit-friendly than the typical transaction(s) at the snack bar. When catering starts to become a major force, it's time to explore investing in a separate kitchen line to service the needs of large groups. It should pay for itself within a season.

Let Mike take you to the next level of profitability...

Mike will present two sessions during the WWA Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada: Advanced Food & Beverage Managing Skills for Taking Concessions to New Heights In Profit Contributions on Thursday, October 10, from 9:15 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.; and Food & Beverage Basics 101: How to Set Up for Financial Success on Wednesday, October 9, from 9:45 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.

Planning Ahead to Meet Design Needs, Customer Expectations & Budget Targets

Perhaps the biggest downfall of a waterpark's f/b operation is the inability to move the line of customers at more than a glacial pace. Long lines can translate to missed sales and/or cranky guests. A rush is inevitable and maybe unavoidable, but there are many things that can be done to delay or minimize the crunch:

- **Treat early lunch eaters as a rush.** Sweeping aside this first group of people with a sense of urgency can keep the lines from forming for several minutes. (There is truth in the saying, "Everyone hustles when it's busy. The difference between an average f/b staff and a great staff is what they do when it's not busy.")

- **Menu placement is critical.** If it can't be read until one reaches the ordering window, there is no hope. It preferably should hang outside, elevated and easy to read from several feet back, meaning the lettering and prices are formatted for a quick decision. Preview menu boards should also be strategically placed in line to help the guest.

- **Take orders before the guest reaches the window.** Nothing moves a line like having a f/b person taking orders before a guest reaches the window. This is a job for only the best of employees, someone who is super-charged with menu knowledge and can answer any question about portion sizes, item specifications, prices, etc. The order is taken by the staffer on a pre-printed ticket and handed by the guest to the person at the window, thus dispensing with all the hemming and hawing normally associated with people trying to make up their minds while the cashier stares into oblivion. This process could be taken to the next level by outfitting the person taking orders in line with a wireless headset to communicate with the kitchen in certain situations.

- **Double your line speed.** For smaller operations that rely on the two-window setup of "order here" and "pick up here," it is time to rethink the system. If not there already, soda towers need to be relocated between the windows. Then each register can take and fill orders. Line speed just doubled, if not more.

- **Simplify change making.** Menu engineering should be calculated so that price includes tax, e.g., all prices are in increments of a quarter, ending in .25, .50, .75 or .00. Transactions are quicker, as the change-making process is simplified and the customer isn't surprised and short on funds, which also slows line speed.



Despite the planning involved in creating a successful kitchen layout or better line movement, it will all be for naught unless at least equal effort is put into best managing the f/b numbers on a daily and weekly basis.

There are more scientific ways than holding one's breath or crossing the fingers in hopes that the numbers will turn out OK. Among other tasks, this means doing weekly inventories, then creating a weekly cost of goods that should be compared to a theoretical or ideal cost of goods. This is based on sales mix and prices paid for goods coming in the back door (a topic worthy of an article in itself.) The season is short. Wouldn't it be nice to know after the first week or two whether there are any "leaks" or red flags signaling that things are not going as planned, rather than wait until July 15th for the first meaningful set of financials? Planning how the numbers will be tracked makes as much sense as spending thousands of dollars on a new kitchen design or equipment.

Food and beverage at the waterpark deserves a bit of micromanaging. Smart design and focused management can change the f/b status from the "necessary evil" to a respected, breakaway model for sales and profit potential. To paraphrase the first sentence of the article, instead of feathering off from f/b because of its complexities, management needs to demystify it by taking it on for what it is truly worth. **WWA**

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