

Desperately Seeking Happy

As you read in my last blog, Happy Hour can – if not carefully planned – produce very unhappy results for an operator. So how can I too be happy? you may ask yourself.

Tip 1: Different foods for different moods.

Too many restaurants simply take a few items from their regular menu, discount them significantly and call that their HH menu. It's quick and requires no new items, no new training. But! why would a customer come for dinner anymore and pay \$13.00 for something they know they can get a HH fro \$5.00? You blinked. That item is now dead for dinner.

Happy Hour items are not food, they are snacks, palate teasers, meant to transition diners from work day to soothing evening out. These items need to be unique and bar oriented because the real relaxer is the cocktail and that's in the bar. So the guideline is: Bar – sociable, transitional, stimulating; Dining Room – personal, intimate, relaxing.

Tip 2: Use Current Inventory

Make HH items from left-over items that might otherwise go to waste. Second and third use dishes can be every bit as good as those presented in their first-use format, e.g. miniature French Dip sandwiches made from re-thermalized prime rib.

Tip 3: Think Hand sized

One hand has a drink in it AND HH is meant to stimulate the palate for a “real meal” after. So if you have to have a burger on HH menu, make it a slider – not the dinner burger. Smaller sizes, simply presentations.

Tip 4: Leave a Bread Crumb Trail

Don't let customers come for HH and then leave without dinner. Let them see the dinner menu in some form as an enticement to move to the dining room. Make it easy for them to follow on to the next station.

NOTE: There are those who feel strongly that dinner should NOT be served in the bar. This is an important decision to make. If you don't, then you can get them in the bar AND in the dining room. Each place has a purpose, keep them separate. This also speeds up drink service and does not confuse the service responsibilities.

Tip 7: Cheap Drinks does not equal Happy

Drink pricing is like food pricing – it's designed to be profitable. So if you have unique food for HH, you need unique drinks also. One theory is that if

you only discount selected drinks, it will frustrate or confuse the consumer. So have a HH punch. One place here in Seattle designs a daily mixed drink punch in a large bowl. This is not seen as discounted, though it can be cheaper as the result of labor savings, but as special. HH is special not cheap.

Tip 8: Know Your True Costs

Many operators are guilty of not having carefully costed their regular menu items. Tsk tsk. The last thing you need is to offer discounted fare at a worse margin than what you are already running. HH does **not** mean discounted profit!

Tough times may have generated desperate measures. But it is not too late to do it sensibly, with total commitment to your brand image.