

Strategic Menu Development: Its Impact on Waste Reduction

by
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Control of waste is all too often a retro fit concept. Rarely is it built in from the inception of concept articulation, through menu development and into equipment selection. “There is always waste” too often leads to thinking that waste can not be managed. Foodservice operators opt more us to focus on reactive measures rather than proactive strategies. In a business where success is measure in tens of points, it would be preposterous to not manage the one aspect of an operation that does not involved key dictated aspects such as labor, customer count, or pricing.

A Preventative and Appreciative Culture

Not much will occur if an operation does not take seriously “Zero Waste” as a cultural value. Those operations most effective with waste management have “no waste” as part of their mission statement. Sound bold? Boldness is what creates attention, challenge and change – and success. They create in-depth training materials clarifying the effects of waste on the planet, the immediate environment, and the community in which they conduct business. The degree to which employees embrace such learning is inspiring. They see the larger picture to which they are contributing and begin to identify more opportunities for waste prevention. It is tis ownership of preventative strategies that leads to new methods.

It really is simpler than it might seem to those who have consciously tacked control of their waste.

First: Establish an internal culture that believes in and fully understands the “why’s” of championing and sustaining waste management practices.

Second: Create an appreciative environment that not only defines keys to waste management but then also acknowledges on-mission behavior.

Third: Identify Key Result Areas for waste prevention and assure they are taught and rewarded.

Finally: Reward new ideas and methodologies for waste prevention.

The Birth of Waste: Menu Design

Child Development specialists have known for some time that eating habits within the first year of life establish the fat level of an infant for the rest of their lives. Systems are put in place that become virtually impossible to overcome later in life as a reaction to undesired bloat. For Food Service operations, this over bloat, or waste is built in at Menu Development. Menus are too often designed without “inventory intelligence”. In one operation, an inventory audit was done, and it was determined that over 400 ingredients were being used to create 40 menu items. This is not

unusual. Once all recipes were studied and altered, a reduced set of core ingredients of 275 was established – without noticeable alteration of flavor profiles. The company was able to save thousands of dollars per year. Various techniques applied in the development of a menu can assist an operation in achieving purposeful waste reduction before ever opening their doors. And without tooting my own horn too loudly, this is a key function of a consultant and a key reason they need to be bought in: the avoidance of problems that they are too often brought in later to fix. A good one can

- Create menus that build into the recipe matrix secondary, even tertiary, use options for ingredients;
- Utilize “platform recipe development”, wherein a few base items create the foundation for several others., such as utilizing one salad dressing as a base for not only other dressings, but also marinades, sauces and dips;
Develop proper portioning standards that prevent excessive waste coming back to the dish room;
- Build the menu around items that, by their very nature, have multiple uses, such as boneless chicken breasts (soups, salads, sandwiches, entrees); and
- Create high-perceived-value menu items whose likelihood of selling at high and frequent levels leads to waste avoidance.

Next month I will discuss in-house practices that will reinforce control of waste. In the meanwhile, you are tasked with locating a good consultant to aid in your efforts, OK?

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Regimen for Waste Reduction: Rigorous Storage, Receiving and Rotation

Hundreds and thousands of dollars are wasted every year from sloppy receiving practices. Code dates are not checked, and the consequence is loss of precious shelf life on perishable products. Product lost because customer count is down following a freak snow storm is a very different thing from product lost because your own practices allowed it. Even once received correctly, rotation which may seem like a pain to do at the time, will further contribute to waste. Finally, product stored incorrectly even for a very short time reduces its shelflife exponentially. Remember: once product is in the 41 degree F. to 140 degree F. danger zone, bacteria doubles every 15 minutes.

So consider:

- assigning a 'receiving expert' on staff thoroughly trained to check code dates, who will
- employ First In, First Out rotation and check it daily, and
- set up a physical layout of inventory that has no cracks for items to get lost in, behind, or under.

Anticipating Waste: Opportunistic Purchasing and Tactical Inventory Management

How often have we heard operators say, "In the summer I always order 10 cases of romaine a week." - Even though they are throwing away portions of those cases every week. And at costs that can vary radically. Lazy? Maybe. But often they lack or fail to check, data that could help them make timely, cost-saving decisions. Without sales information which shows peaks and valleys week-by-week, month-by-month and year-to-year, along with notification of price changes, the kitchen manager has no conclusive way to moderate their purchasing habits. You simply cannot trust to eye balling inventory checks, even if the person scanning is 'almost always close.' So, ask yourself, "Who is . . .

- Studing sales reports daily for strategic ordering and par level adjustments?
- Taking inventory daily or weekly at the least?
- Adjusting par levels continuously, to reflect NOW sales volumes?
- Utilizing selective purchasing of deals and seasonal offerings?
- Considering product state: fresh vs. frozen vs. canned (and the storage space for each)?
- Identifying ingredients that create the highest yields and least waste, with an eye to converting their "Scrap" to useable product?

Smart Equipment and Design Choices

Many operators have spatial restrictions built into their locations. But there is an optimal flow and efficiency solution for every one of them. Layout Design can reduce waste, just as menu development design can. Furthermore, equipment manufacturers have made enormous breakthroughs with their cooking, holding and storage technologies that also contribute to waste reduction. The degree to which a kitchen design makes sense to the users is the degree to which they will champion waste reduction. Side note: excessive employee turnover is often due to poor work environments built in by design. [another waste, another article]

So if you have set up a solid menu in the beginning, you will now be able to

- Choose equipment whose technology supports not only the best execution of menu items but also allows for maximum yields and prolonged shelf life of products
- Example: In conventional cooking environments, a 5-ounce boneless, skinless chicken breast will weigh 3.75 – 4.00 ounces after cooking. This is loss of 20% - 25%. Other tested technologies reduce shrinkage to as low as 10%, and rarely more than 15%. Ditto nearly every ingredient. You do the math.
- Utilize equipment that allows for blast-chilling, dehydrating or other methods of processing seasonal items for storage that can be purchased at their peak and at best prices.
- Install walk-ins and freezers close to receiving areas for ease of storage immediately upon receiving.

