

# Foodservice @Retail

## Adapting Restaurant Standards to Improve Your Foodservice Operations

by Michael Williams/Unified Brands  
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Millennials' and retiring Boomers' desire for fresh, partially or fully prepared food has swelled in recent years. Some grocers have targeted this trend by expanding their deli, while others have seized the opportunity to "up their game" by prioritizing the appearance and feel of dining into a restaurant-like experience. Consumers spend more money when they feel comfortable and enjoy the experience, and the food, atmosphere and equipment all make a difference.

Grocery operators who currently run in-store foodservice operations have applied the concept in a variety of ways. From meat-and-three lunch lines to full "grocerant" concepts, the goal is to enhance profits. Prepared food drives higher margins than traditional grocery products; however, the operating and equipment costs are higher as well. This is why the first step an operator should take is to establish an independent P&L for the operation. This puts the higher operating costs into perspective with double-digit margins. Operators also should consider other restaurant industry standards. Let's explore a few standards that can add structure and accountability to a grocery store-based foodservice operation.

### Employees

Let's begin with the employees. Even if you have the finest facility, employees can make or break a concept. Front-line employees are the face of your business. How is their attitude? Are they a shining and helpful asset for your business?

How about their apparel? It must be clean, neat and coordinated with the remainder of the foodservice team. Yes, I said the foodservice team. It is important to have a team dedicated to foodservice. They must be trained in sanitization, food safety, task skills (i.e. food prep, customer service) and inventory management. These skills are specific to a successful and profitable prepared food marketing effort.

### Sanitation

Clean, neat and coordinated are descriptive words for a professional foodservice sanitation plan. Whether the customer can see the various kitchen preparation areas or not, all areas must be clean and coordinated. The sanitation plan should include color-coded buckets, such as green for cleaning solutions and red for sanitizers, test strips stored in a visible location and multiple hand wash sinks stocked with soap, paper towels and gloves. Chemicals should be in a system that measures the accurate amount for the task.

Cross-contamination of raw and cooked food is a major threat. Avoid establishing work areas where both raw and cooked meats, seafood and poultry are being processed simultaneously. Thoroughly wash, rinse and sanitize surfaces after contact with each raw product. Also, under no circumstances should shellfish or raw poultry be thawed or cleaned in the same area where produce is being processed.

Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free requests are on the rise in all markets. The people who make these dietary choices are doing it for a variety of reasons. In some cases it is for medical purposes while, for others, it is a lifestyle choice. To show respect for their dietary choice, establish a special area for non-meat prep. This vegetarian prep area can be as simple as a dedicated prep table housed in the produce prep area. Once it is in place, let your customers know it. For so long, this segment of the market has been underserved. Many of your customers will thank you for it.

How about the front of the house? Establish rules to isolate utensils used with shellfish and vegetarian items.

How about the cashier? They can pull double duty, right? I say no; the easiest way to control cross-contamination is to eliminate the opportunity for it to occur. For a multitude of reasons, no employee handling food should work the register or handle money.

If possible, your foodservice design should include restrooms specifically for the dining area, and those restrooms should be spotless. Think about it—if you visit the restroom of a restaurant and it is not spotless, how favorably do you consider the establishment? Someone will pay attention to the details, so you best tend to them before your customers point them out.

### Finance

Clear recordkeeping, reporting and accountability are essential. Documenting your food safety plan limits liability from foodborne illness. Daily reports of work area inspection, temperature logs and product rotation routines help to ensure your daily business stays on track.

Restaurateurs understand "the profit is in the details." Inventory management is an excellent way to control costs. Are products present that have not been used in four weeks? These are typically considered dead weight. How was this inventory procured? Will it ever be used again? Write a "daily special" today, use the inventory tomorrow and don't reorder it.

### Food waste

A restaurant cannot succeed with excessive food spoilage; everything must be used. Spoilage or waste not only includes the cost of food but all costs associated with preparation, packaging and cleaning. For example, a chef can reduce waste by using a blast chiller to properly cool unsold roasted chicken for salad or soup. The bones can be combined with vegetable ends and pieces to make a rich chicken soup stock in a kettle. Produce that is blemished and cannot be sold in the produce area can also be used for stews, sauces or soups.

### Food consistency and quality

Consumers will not accept moderate-quality products for restaurant dining dollars. The offerings don't have to be complicated, but they must be consistent in portion size, made with quality ingredients and be house-made if possible. For example, you should not use processed turkey for a "hand carved" roasted turkey sandwich. The flavor and consistency must be better than what they buy from the deli or they will buy it from the deli at a lower final margin. When you lose the sandwich, you lose the chips, fountain beverage and the fresh-baked cookie, and all of these ancillary products can bring healthy double-digit margins to the sales mix.

Flavor trends are moving away from highly processed foods. Terms like clean labeling, healthy fats, ancient grains and indulgence foods in moderation are highly prevalent, so thoughtful equipment and menu planning is a must. Employing new trends while maximizing production capacity is a delicate balance. Many times, targeted tastes are new for the operation and stretch the capabilities of its equipment. Avoid the temptation to just offer pre-made items to meet those needs.

Embrace the trends you can execute. People will still want fried chicken, but now many of them want fried chicken and

waffles. Upscaling the pizza concept is one example of how you can enhance fresh food offerings. A quality pizza table and tabletop deck or conveyor pizza oven are essential in an attractive program. Quality ingredients like arugula and fresh mozzarella should be held at the correct temperature and handled on a clean workspace. The right equipment can make a noticeable difference with these costly ingredients and help address some of the operational challenges for casual pizza concepts.

Keeping your employees informed through training on food trends and new ideas is a constant task. Prior to each meal part—a serving period such as lunch or dinner—the staff will have a lineup. During the lineup, the food will be tasted by the staff, and each special dish will be described by the chef. This does wonders for customer interaction during the shift. The employee can describe the food from a firsthand perspective. To segments with greater disposable income like Millennials and many Boomers (empty nesters), this enriched experience gives a sense of being in a restaurant.

### Training

Periodic training also is important for keeping current on food code changes, enhancements to sanitation programs and merchandising techniques. I recently shared training ideas at a chef's conference that focused on helping associates learn to group ingredients so they coincide with a recipe. This simple merchandising method has been an effective way to improve sales of margin-rich, partially cooked products, specialty ingredients and fresh produce.

Another topic of interest addresses the specialty ice cream trend. The concept is to offer fresh flavored custards for specialty ice creams. Fruit juice mixes could also be available for sorbets and granitas. Here is how it works: the customer selects the desired flavored product from the cooler and then the instruction card for their flavor choice. The customer takes it home and cranks up the ice cream machine. Before you know it, they have a frozen "house-made" treat to delight their family or guests.

### Feedback

Now that you have done all of this work, how do you know what your customers think? How do you get your message out and gather feedback? I suppose the traditional answer is comment cards. These have been somewhat effective in years past, but most people no longer take the time to fill out a card. In reality, we are in the digital age. Social media is very much a part of everyday life. An easy method of reaching out to your current customer base is to utilize loyalty program communications the store already has in place. Another thought is to use QSR codes on products and signs and provide a link to learn about the product. In the message you can also provide a link to your feedback portal on your website.

In summary, the foodservice operation requires the same daily management and investment as a restaurant, so it should be operated in a professional manner. Remember the rewards can be double-digit margin, and good operations bring customers in the door for all of the products in the store.

Cheers to good cooking and living!



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