

Convenience Store News

How to Staff Your Foodservice Area

By Maureen Azzato



For convenience stores to succeed in foodservice, they must think of themselves as hospitality-focused restaurants – not simply c-stores selling food.

Hospitality is more than providing good customer service. In fact, hospitality takes customer service a step further. Customers are viewed more as guests and interactions with them are more personal and friendly, and less transactional than regular retail exchanges.

If you go back to the root of the founding of McDonald's Corp., founder Ray Kroc's mantra was quality, service and cleanliness — the same pillars that are critical today. So, as convenience store operators embark on hiring the right employees for their foodservice areas, they need to keep those core principles in mind, and hire people who can help them achieve and maintain high standards in all three areas.

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While building a foodservice culture comes from the top of the organization and trickles down to store-level employees, those on the front lines become emblematic of a company's culture and help sustain it as they engage and interact with guests. For that reason, the foodservice manager, assistant manager and store associates are vital to the success of a chain's food operation, according to Convenience Store News' How To Crew experts.

"The front-line employee really represents your brand. They have the interaction with the guest and can set the tone for how the guest will perceive you and your product and service," said Ed Burcher, a former retailer turned consultant who is the newest member of the CSNews How To Crew.



Attitude Trumps Skills

Because the hospitality business requires that extra friendly interaction with guests, most foodservice experts agree that front-line employees should be hired for their attitude and personalities first, and skills second. The reason for this is that skills can be taught, while someone's personality is ingrained and not likely to change for a job.

It also helps if they have a service-oriented personality, one that enjoys bringing people comfort and pleasure. While foodservice experience is not vital for foodservice associates, it is key for assistant foodservice managers and foodservice managers.

Foodservice managers must be friendly and outgoing too, but they also need leadership skills, the ability to multitask and, most importantly, have profit and loss experience.

Call to Action: Foodservice 101

- Hire for personality and work ethic. Management will come later and might emerge from the initial people hired.
- Avoid "mercy hires" made out of desperation.
- Hire people that make a strong first impression because that's what customers will remember.
- Look for people for whom a smile comes easily.
- During the interview, talk about your strict standards for grooming, hygiene and overall appearance.

Of course, the best way to develop managers is to look for some of these skills in assistant managers who will one day take over as foodservice management, and hopefully go even further in the organization.

In addition to having an aptitude for math, front-line supervisors must also understand – or show a predisposition for

learning – the overall foodservice business and the importance of cost control, according to Larry Miller, a foodservice consultant with Miller Management & Consulting Services and another member of the CSNews How To Crew.

You also want folks who understand the importance of balancing cost control vs. quality control and to not sacrifice quality to attain short-term profits. "It's very easy to fall into that trap," Miller added. "But if you sacrifice quality to reduce costs and raise profit, long term it will hurt the business."

Hire people that also enjoy teaching, Miller advised. "Observe them giving instructions to others at their job and notice if they have the ability to teach rather than just give orders," he said, noting that strong organizational skills and time management are helpful, too.

The foodservice manager is two things: staff coach and auditor of the offer, said Burcher. "They must have the ability to teach, coach and motivate the staff," he said. "They also have to have attention to detail for both the preparation of the menu and the food-safety procedures to ensure a quality offer."

Foodservice managers must, at a minimum, be trained and certified in ServSafe or an equivalent program, the experts agree. Some of the best foodservice managers are those who previously worked for branded fast feeders because they already understand cost control, cleanliness and suggestive selling. "They [are more inclined] to focus on sales growth, labor costs and food costs," said Dean Dirks, a foodservice consultant and member of the CSNews How To Crew.

One trait to seek in all foodservice job candidates, no matter the job level, is personal hygiene and people that make a nice first impression. When they come in for the interview, make sure they are neat and clean -- their hair is clean and brushed, hands are washed, and fingernails are clean and trimmed. "Personal appearance, grooming, hygiene and overall first impression are, for me, the initial key attributes for which I rate someone quickly," Miller stated. "If I am looking at them at their workplace, I expect them to make a good first impression."

Recruiting & Training

One advantage the convenience store industry can offer foodservice managers with quick-service restaurant (QSR) experience is a better lifestyle. The typical QSR or restaurant job involves working nights, weekends and holidays. As one retail expert explained, "These are slower times for us, so the quality of life is what this channel offers. It is huge for experienced managers looking for a change. It's not the money."

The other advantage, for stores that have truly invested in image and store remodels to add foodservice, is an inviting environment to work in. "Many who would not have worked for a gas station or convenience store do want to work for [stores] that are more upscale and inviting," said Burcher.

Most industry experts make no bones about the fact that they recruit heavily from QSRs, especially for assistant foodservice managers and foodservice managers. The very best way to recruit is to go into fast-food locations and watch the employees and managers. "If you see someone who impresses you, give them your card and let them know that if they ever want an opportunity to e-mail you or give you a call," advised Dirks.

Some also recruit from fast-casual restaurants and family restaurants. Recruitment should be ongoing, not just when you lose employees and are desperate. That's when the worst hires are made, experts noted.

Call to Action: Foodservice 201

- While hiring for attitude and personality will still be important, look for a leader to emerge, especially one with financial skills.
- Hire friendly people that have common goals and interests so strong teams develop in stores.

When hiring foodservice associates, be sure they fit in with the store team you have developed and don't promote from inside the company unless the employee is in foodservice, Burcher said. Bringing people over from non-food departments usually doesn't work well. It's important to hire "foodies."

Call to Action: Foodservice 301

- Look for a leader (foodservice director) with supervisory skills and capabilities. This individual is primarily the motivator and systems analyst.
- This new leader will be charged with all areas, including procurement, scheduling, customer service, training, food safety, cost control

- service, training, food safety, pest control, equipment maintenance and repair, merchandising and marketing.
- Develop layers of controls to keep the foodservice department and stores functioning. You will need managers, assistant managers, field personnel and corporate headquarters personnel, all of which require different skill sets.

The other aspect of foodservice that should be ongoing is training. It never stops. Once employees are trained, then you retrain them. While classroom training, online interactive training and other structured programs are important to ensure consistent communication of standards and execution, on-the-job training is where most of the real learning is done.

"Visual aids are key, but it's a manual task and nothing replaces doing it," one retail expert said. "Practice makes perfect. Measuring cups, training aids [and] reference books are all great, but it's a very hands-on activity. You can't learn how to water ski watching a video."

In-store job aids should include simple explanations with strong graphics to show what the menu items should look like at each stage of preparation, according to Burcher, who noted that shoulder-to-shoulder training is the best way to impart the actual procedure of making food items and presenting them. There also has to be an audit program – both formal and informal – to ensure consistency is delivered, he said. This can take the form of checklists, mystery shops, inspections or full store reviews.

And, of course, food safety training is a must for all foodservice employees at every level of the operation, according to CSNews' How To Crew experts. "We have a responsibility to serve safe food and teach a generation [about food preparation] that may not have gone beyond microwaving products at home," Burcher said.

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