

Building a Foodservice Culture



Over the years, I have been asked many questions on developing food offers. What does it take to introduce a successful food offer? What is the right offer for my stores? How do I decide? How do I develop different offers for each of my store locations? How long will it take to be successful?

These are all good questions to ask before you embark on the development of a food offer. You want to get the offer “right” when you develop and implement it. The stakes can be high if you are wrong — wasted resources, squandered goodwill and write-downs of equipment, to list a few.

But I think retailers need to ask the bigger question first and be totally honest in their answer. That is: What am I willing to invest, particularly in time and patience, to build a foodservice culture that will support the offer? The right culture is necessary to provide the foundation to ensure your programs are successful.

I think back to my days at Wawa. We would get calls from other companies for store tours and visits to show them what we were doing. Our vice president of marketing would honor almost any request. Even the major and regional oil companies asked for tours and we would accommodate them. His philosophy, which turned out to be all too true, was that Wawa had more to learn from these sessions than they would learn from us. We were open with our programs, designs and back-of-the-house processes because we knew they could not copy the one thing that made us successful — our culture and people.

I know most visitors went home, dissected the store look, built it and ultimately failed. Why? Because it is not just the bricks and mortar that are required for success. I recall one company in particular that toured our stores. A year later, they introduced an offer similar to ours in the Philadelphia market. They copied some of the design and marketing, and most of the offer. But they forgot the most important thing that set Wawa apart from others — the people. Our vice president realized you can't copy culture and people. You have to nurture and support it. Culture sets the good food operators apart from the rest.

Now, don't get me wrong. There are changing expectations for food quality and choices, and we must respond. Today, equipment technology and product production allow for better quality food to be served in our stores. I also know that all of the cues — visual, graphic and sensory — will support a new food offer. But in the end, it is the people who must execute and support your offer.

I would suggest that there are preliminary questions a company should ask themselves before embarking on a new offer. A culture includes vision, teamwork and beliefs, and is not created without attention and commitment. These questions are:

- Who will nurture the new culture? Culture is about ensuring that the vision is set and the company is honest with their capabilities and how to improve them.
- Who will ensure the resources to support the capability development are in place? Culture is about building consensus and commitment to the direction, and supporting this with actions, not just words.
- Who is the champion of the offer? Culture is about having the patience to see the end of the journey, to get through the rough parts, the inevitable setbacks and changes required to succeed.
- Will the leaders support the time, labor, waste and investment necessary to build the offer? In an industry that must change its offer and product mix, the question is not if we should be looking to build a foodservice culture, but rather what happens if we do not build it. All of the evidence, trends and numbers point to other companies invading our long-dominated space of convenience.

Once you have answered the tough questions, the next step is to address these four points. This will go a long way in helping you build a foodservice culture:

1. Go in with eyes wide open. What are you trying to build with this offer, who is your guest (today and tomorrow) and what will they want from your stores?
2. What is the vision for your company short term and especially long term? What business are you building and what will be required to support it?
3. How do you establish and demonstrate the commitment to the programs with actions? What is your comfort level with waste, labor and the time required to build the offer?
4. How will you continue to support the culture as it evolves and develops?

Building a foodservice culture begins at senior levels. There is more success when the leaders of a company are aligned to the long-term vision and the path to get there.

When we started the journey to build the first Neighbours store in Canada, we looked to learn from others that had built new food offers and changed their culture. One European company's president gave us something to think about. He asked, "Who will protect you when the going gets rough? Who will support you when you stumble and need more time? You will stumble and you will need support. If you do not have this support at very senior levels, you will not succeed."

I believe he summed up the simple point about culture: Without the leadership and vision from the top to create and support an offer, you are probably headed for failure. Culture starts with the leaders; their alignment, commitment and demonstration to the organization that what you are doing is important and necessary to develop your store offer.

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Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this column are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of Convenience Store News.