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"THE NEED FOR CONTRACTORS" - by A J Forte

Napoleon, like Caesar and the great explorers before him, recognised the importance of keeping his armies well fed.

Over the years, many industrialists, having seen the advantages of keeping the workforce on-site during meal breaks, have adopted the same attitude.

Most of them accept that catering is a skilled profession and that, the scope of their own management is unlikely to stretch to the provision of food for the workforce.

Some may think that a part-time cook and helpers, under the guidance of a personnel director, can cope with the task.

However, the wise and those with first hand experience of the problems which can hit, even the simplest of staff feeding operations, are likely to opt for the professional catering contractor, who will take all the worries off his shoulders.

Know your customers

In order to gain the full advantage of having a staff restaurant on site, the facility needs to be carefully planned and tastefully appointed. The restaurant must be able to provide a break from the work environment, relief from the grind, relaxation of mind and body. The employee must enjoy the experience and go back to the work station rested and raring to go again.

To provide such a facility, requires a sizeable investment, and having spent the money on a pleasant eating area with the kitchen and back-up facilities required, it would be unfortunate, to say the least, if, for whatever reason, the majority of the workforce did not make appropriate use of the facilities.

The caterer, therefore, must provide the food which the workforce wants to eat and, in order to keep them coming in, day after day, the menu must be varied, sensitive to changing food fashion and always containing an element of surprise.

The caterer must get to know his customers. The composition of the workforce, is it predominantly male or female? age groups, socio-economic background, will the staff lunch be the main meal of the day or is it just a snack?

Could the workforce find an alternative to the staff restaurant, within easy walking distance of the workplace? If so, what? a pub or a winebar? fast food or sandwich bar?

Of course, there are many incentives on offer to entice customers to use the work's restaurant but, if the caterer is not aware of the competition, he is likely to lose his customers to it.

Market Research

Thorough market research is as vital in the workplace, as it would be on the high street in town and, the wise caterer will not adopt a "suck-it-and-see" approach. The customers likes and expectations will be in the forefront of the plan even before the restaurant has been built.

Neither can the caterer lose sight of managements' goals. How do they wish to finance the operation? What costs, if any, do they wish to pass on to the staff? How much can the caterer spend on food or on labour?

Will there be one restaurant for all grades of staff or a separate facility for management and workers?

Does the Chairman or Chief Executive wish to entertain on-site or will business lunches be taken elsewhere?

All these questions need to be answered before the caterer can begin to serve staff meals.

The professional caterer will be able to provide whatever the customer wants but, when planning the facility, both client and caterer must appreciate the needs of the workforce and each others needs and expectations. It is not easy to accommodate second thoughts.

Restaurant Layout & Service

Naturally, the driving force in providing a staff restaurant must be the retention of staff on-site but very often, the work pattern is such, that meal breaks will be taken within a very short period of the day.

If the restaurant is unable to deal with a rush and customers are forced to wait in endless queues for half of their lunch breaks, it is likely that they will bring their own sandwiches the following day.

Modern food halls providing the variety of food the average workforce demands cuts the waiting to a minimum, as customers can go to the section they prefer, without having to form a line regardless of what they wish to eat. If a queue is too long in one area, the customer has the option of different meals from alternative bars.

Sandwiches, snacks and even microwavable meals, can be dispensed from vending machines, as can soft drinks and hot drinks.

Food halls are ideal to provide the full range of food with minimal front of house staff involvement.

Where the staff is young, food halls can provide fast food stands. Ethnic tastes can be catered for, by having stir fried, or barbecued products, freshly produced on request in front of the customer.

Italian, Indian, French and Spanish tastes can all be accommodated. Everything is possible, provided the caterer knows his customers and obtains the necessary manpower and equipment resources to produce the goods.

Skilled Chef or Convenience Food

The next dilemma is the production of food.

No doubt, the caterer will be asked to keep his staffing costs to a minimum and, having educated most people in the art of self help, it is not difficult to run the restaurant side of the operation with very few people in attendance.

However, the problem area is in the kitchen.

These days of "everything ready-to-serve" would suggest that there is no need for cooking skills, however, customers soon tire of the "manufactured" products and, within a short period of time, the caterer is forced to introduce some home cooking.

Home cooking requires skills and, once a skilled person is introduced, the convenience food begins to disappear, gradually prepared on-site replaces bought-in, which is fine, provided that the kitchen, which may well have been planned to operate on prepared foods has the space and equipment to cope with on-site preparation and cooking.

Food Service Assistants have to become food handlers. They must receive further training, not only to be able to prepare the food, but to alert them to the dangers and risks of food poisoning. If half the workforce become ill as a result of the food eaten in the staff restaurant, the caterer is unlikely to retain his contract.

Even with a fully fledged cook-chill operation, a degree of site production is likely, therefore, it is wise to accept from the very beginning, that a kitchen requires a Chef or at the very least a Cook/Manager.

However, staffing levels can be kept to a minimum by making use of prepared ingredients. There is no need to peel potatoes or cut up meat onsite.

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The drudgery and labour intensity of preparation can be left to the suppliers, but let the Chef apply the finishing touches.

Job Satisfaction

By so doing, the caterer gains two major benefits. Firstly, the Chef is given the satisfaction of putting his own "signature" on the food he serves and, secondly, the consumer no longer recognises the product as a standard, factory-produced item.

The director's dining room can provide another area for the Chef to practice his art and show off his skills and, if senior management and their visitors are able to eat onsite rather than loose countless hours, running up sizeable expense accounts, in the nearest "decent eating house" the salary of a good Chef will easily be justified.

The answer therefore, is to have a good Chef, a skilled Kitchen Manager, who will make full use of prepared food and minimise the number of staff and level of skills in his own kitchen.

It is important to avoid gimmicks. No facility can run on one single system of catering.

Cook-chill

There was a time when cook-freeze was going to eliminate all the skills in kitchens, but customers insisted on wanting fried eggs and salads and it was impossible to cook, freeze, reheat and serve a rare steak.

Frozen soups were expensive to freeze and keep in frozen storage, to say nothing of the cost of transporting frozen water from place to place.

So, once the true costs were known, cook-freeze went out of fashion, but, no sooner had the last blast freezer been sold, than the first blast chiller appeared, in all its glory, exalting the merits of "cook-chill".

Cook-chilled food, providing it is kept below 3°C, has a shelf life of at least 5 days.

The technology is good and, whereas before, a night or weekend catering shift would be needed to feed staff, production of such meals could now take place during normal working hours, thus saving on premium rates of pay and giving workers outside normal hours the same quality of food as the remainder of the staff.

Setting up such a facility however, takes a considerable amount of capital and, too often, the volume of food which can be produced with the equipment and staff available, is far in excess of the food required on-site.

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The temptation to fill the spare capacity by producing and selling meals off-site is often too great to resist but, the ambitious cook-chill operator soon learns that the marketing effort, transport and distribution costs involved, will soon erode his meagre profit margins.

Of course cook-chill has a part to play in a modern kitchen establishment. After all, any food which needs advanced preparation, or involves a two stage cooking process, will benefit from rapid chilling before refrigerated storage and the next stage of production, but, the would-be entrepreneur, who imagines that the cook-chill system will mean a cheaper way to feed people should really think again.

It is quite possible that, rather than save money the system could cost more. It takes as long to reheat many products, as it would to cook them fresh at the time of service. So why bother to cook, chill and store them?

Sous-vide (Under vacuum)

The French thought they had found the answer by preparing raw food, placing it in a vacuum pack, keeping it cold and then cooking it at the point of service.

Sensibly, the French authorities, recognising the dangers of Botulism, banned this system.

Semi-pasteurised

Semi-pasteurised meals, sealed in flexible cans and kept under refrigeration, were thought to be ideal, but the quality has never matched that of freshly prepared or even frozen food.

In short, no matter what the new gimmick, the requirement for a skilled caterer and Chef, in any catering outlet, is bound to stay with us for the foreseeable future.

The skilled Chef, using a combination of fresh, chilled, frozen and canned prepared foods, will continue to provide the best solution to the catering problems for some considerable time to come.

Selecting Suppliers

Unfortunately, knowing and selecting the raw materials which need to be purchased, is not the end of the story for today's caterer.

Suppliers must be chosen with care and the caterer must be confident that the source of his raw materials is hygienic and professionally managed.

Of course, the task can be delegated to reputable wholesalers but, the Food Act suggests that, wherever possible, the purchaser should have first hand knowledge of the supplier.

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The Food Act, which came into force at the beginning of this year, will do much to raise the standards of professionalism now required to manage a food business.

Catering can no longer be taken lightly and, the provision of food requires professional, well qualified people, equipped with appropriate and adequate equipment, in suitable hygienic premises.

The failure to comply with legal requirements will result in hefty fines, which should discourage those who may still feel that catering is a career for those who are insufficiently qualified to do anything else.

Contracting Out

Catering is no longer for the amateur and, the wise Manager will soon recognise that, feeding his staff is far too important to leave it in the hands of one of his busy colleagues, who can hardly cope with his own job, let alone devote the time that is really necessary to manage the catering facility.

Catering can no longer be treated as a spare-time hobby.

The wisdom of handing over the responsibility for the provision of staff meals, to those who have the expertise, management and manpower resources, training facilities, technical support and purchasing power, can no longer be questioned.

It has always made economic sense to use the experts, but now the law has stepped in to help to convince all and sundry that catering is no longer for the amateur and that staff feeding is best left in the hands of the professionals.

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