

OPENING a NEW FACILITY (includes opening more similar units)

CONCEPT IDEATION

At heart, a restaurant is simply a Table and Chair, in some space, with some person to sit in that chair, and some food or drink brought to them by a server. A well articulated concept addresses, to fine detail, all of these components, no matter how they are multiplied.

Whether or not you have been involved in the restaurant industry for years or are just striking out, you must have a High Concept

- if you are planning to open a new foodservice facility or
- if you plan to buy an up and running facility, or
- if you are looking to amend an existing facility.

HIGH CONCEPT here will mean the specific, detailed, and articulated statement of the Vision. It will integrate:

- the menu (layout, graphics, wording)
- what you serve (the menu items),
- how you serve it (all aspects of service, including kitchen), and
- the environs in which all this is carried out (the facility, decor, and signage).

This High Concept is written down in the Vision Document which is used at all decision making junctures during the life of the project. Having an idea is not the same as crafting and articulating an entire High Concept and transcribing it in the Vision Document that can be executed by any number of others.

If any of these four aspects of the High Concept- the Quality Quadrant - is not up fully articulated AND integrated with the others, it will create what I call DINER DISSONANCE. That feeling, often unspoken, which will keep a given customer from coming back.

So Phase 1 of any project is IDEATION - the gut wrenching process by which that glorious image you carry respectfully in your mind's eye, is exposed by a series of developers, designers, contractors and accountants, in a way that may seem heartless but ultimately is the supreme kindness. For they will either expose your idea for what it isn't and in the process save you hundreds of thousands of dollars OR hopefully for all involved, assist in defining a polished fail-safe venture to be shared with many.

[click on Step by Step Graphic to see the process in a modular graphic format.]

FEASIBILITY

ONLY after a High Concept has been articulated in the Vision Document can you determine to what degree you can know in advance if anyone will come once you are open. Of course, in the long run this is not truly knowable to a specific degree. And it just may be, that degree of specificity is where the line is drawn between sustainable success and a slow bleed out.

Much data exists in the world. But it is not just data that is needed; it is information, that elusive relationship between sets of data that we hope harbors the truth. Industry sources and government sources have virtual libraries of data that we will look at along with trend analyses which come from a variety of sources both pop and informed.

The end result is not merely a go or no go indicator. Often these studies will nudge the concept in a direction more conducive to market clientele or product availability or price points to target. I've worked with clients who started out looking to open a small Japanese take out deli and ended up with a medium sized sit down Chinese restaurant. Fortunately, he was ambi-cultural!

MENU DEVELOPMENT

Only from a tight, articulated concept, comes an intelligent menu. Once the IDEATION is complete, and the financial analysis assures feasibility, the task turns to creating an entire straw man menu that reflects the types of items that make sense and support the concept. This is one of the first steps required in utilizing the clearly defined concept as a screening mechanism: no item should appear on the menu that seems dissonant or contrary to what we've said the concept is.

Keep in mind that this step is NOT creating recipes. It is laying out in name and general content only what a customer will see ON the menu handed to them. This step is crucial to the financial success of a restaurant. CRUCIAL! The initial source of Dissonance a customer will feel is when the food they read on the menu does not match their expectation. Long before they determine whether it is any good or not.

In turn, the recipes must be written with a keen sense of the kitchen's equipment and a strong sense of cross utilization of ingredients. Not to mention, eye appeal on the plate, and a flavor profile that both attracts the customer and complements the rest of the items on the menu. No one item can function as it should without a strong supporting cast. This is what often trips up menu changes that come down the road as the result of seasonal changes or slipping sales.

In many cases, the new operator may not have hired a chef who can handle all of the recipe development, documentation and analysis. And it is not to be expected that a

suitable chef will in fact be a developer. There is a difference between cooking well and creating exciting recipes, as much as there is a difference between being a stellar singer and being a songwriter.

Culinary Options can execute these tasks for the client in full but we prefer to mentor and guide a chef or kitchen manager through the process. That way the process is archived in the personnel instead of departing out the door when the consultation is over.

MENU LAYOUT & PRICING

The menu is the most powerful marketing tool a restaurateur has. No external marketing can overcome it if it does not work. Name, external graphics, hype - all set up an expectation. But the first, major personal statement the restaurant makes itself is the menu. A customer's perception of the menu will either confirm or contradict their expectation.

How is the menu shaped?

How many pages?

What font - color - size is employed?

What type of paper?

What is the order of items presented?

To say nothing of the descriptive copy. All must be orchestrated to deliver the concept. These are very important issues that must be carefully considered. They can make or break a server.

Pricing is tricky to say the least. A customer's expectation of what the menu prices will be is set by decor and menu. In addition, price acceptance is as much a function of item name and copy as of ingredients. Some ingredients do carry an expectation of price. Lobster must be expensive on the menu because everyone knows it is expensive. Too good a price makes a customer suspicious. Finally, so while everything does not need to be within a narrow number range, the entire set of prices must make sense as they relate one to the another.

In other words, if you are up market, then all items must have up market prices, even if the cost of goods is disproportionately favorable - total menu impression trumps food cost.