



Tabletop Solutions

Food Service Consultants

Strategic Continuous Improvement

Many years ago I stayed at one of the Helmsley Hotels. It was during the era where owner Leona Helmsley was being promoted as the “Queen” of the New York Palace Hotel. The advertising campaign portrayed her as a demanding “queen” who wanted nothing but the best for her guests, a message that was reiterated in brochures strategically placed around the room including one that addressed Leona’s penchant for “upgrading” customer amenities. According to the brochure, even the toothbrushes had recently been upgraded to Leona’s exacting standards. It was a marvelous campaign and would have been even more impressive if the toothbrush didn’t bend pitifully in your hand before breaking.

What struck me then and continues to stand out in my mind is that the advertising campaign was powerful because it skillfully targeted the guest’s perception of continuous improvement. A simple but apt concept in the hospitality industry where we succeed or fail based on our customers’ perception (the caveat being that you actually need to deliver, which is where Leona’s toothbrush propaganda fell short).

In addition to “walking the walk,” the very best Strategic Continuous Improvement processes generate the perception of increased value to the customer in a transparent manner. A good example of this process in action is the recent Domino’s Pizza campaign; “Did we actually face our critics and reinvent our pizza from the crust up? Oh yes we did.”

Strategic Continuous Improvement does not conflict with the need to manage in a fiscally responsible manner. It is the core.

The first step in the Strategic Continuous Improvement Process is to understand how your customers perceive the performance of your program today and then benchmark future progress against that data. Once you have your initial findings you will need to set clear and measurable goals and priorities for the areas of the program that need to be improved, make a detailed action plan for improvements and determine what resources are needed to make those improvements. A clear road map will allow you to establish metrics to measure your progress toward achieving those goals.

It is of paramount importance that your customers not only perceive that you are working for them in a continuous effort to improve but also that there is real value for them in those improvements. Why? Because, if your prices are in line to generate profit, selling voluntary meal plans is one of the keys to a financially solid college dining program. Therefore, decisions regarding strategic continuous improvement need to be measured against your ability to increase value to your customer. Tabletop Solutions clients typically realize a six to ten percent increase in sales the year following implementation.

I was speaking with one of our Tabletop Solutions clients the other day whose dining program is ranked one of the top ten in the country. While I learn something from each and every one of my clients, this particular individual is so well versed in the art of college dining that it's all I can do to not take notes when she speaks (decidedly poor form for a professional food service consultant).

We were talking about making program changes in anticipation of raising food costs exacerbated by the drought. This Tabletop Solutions client decided to replace the fresh orange juice dispensers with 100% reconstituted juice in the board halls. While her logic was flawless, the decision ran contrary to the customer-centric focus that earned the program its top ten ranking. I feared this change would not only be perceived negatively by her customers but might also adversely impact her voluntary meal plan sales. I suggested she purchase a small commercial juicer to allow interested students to make their own fresh squeezed orange juice, knowing most students would not take the time to do so. Spun correctly the students' perception to the change could actually be positive (what's fresher than squeezing the juice yourself?) and my client's objective to lower costs could still be realized.

I'm a fervent believer that there is a win/win solution to every problem and that your customer must always be one of the winners.

I appreciate that it takes a deft hand to manage effective food service operations. Nowhere is that more true than college dining. While we are all wringing those deft hands in anticipation of rising food costs, steel yourself against the urge to manage to the bottom line. Being bottom-line driven in campus dining is both counterintuitive and fiscally irresponsible. Bottom-line drive management styles adversely affect the very customers we are being paid to serve and jeopardize critical top line sales; the one price nobody can afford to pay.

I believe that a disciplined, integrated approach to food service management provides the best opportunity both to optimize your budget and to continuously improve your program.