

The Transformation of On-Site Dining Service

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First of two articles about changes in campus and corporate dining services to focus on nutrition and wellness.

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The move toward optimum student and employee health has been coming on for quite a while, if somewhat in “fits and starts.”

There is no question that we have passed into another phase of campus and corporate dining. Merely setting out “healthy food,” but focusing our dining on the grill and – for the sake of the dieters – the salad bar now requires a whole new approach.

Ten years ago, the concept of “healthy” meant that there were always two vegetable “sides” go with the hot entrée, that the burger would be reasonably lean and definitely overcooked. Sodas, not as many as the typical cafe carries today, were the same five or six that had been standard for years, very conveniently available at a dispenser.

Yes, there was fruit, but yes, there also were three-inch high layer cake slices, Jell-o for dieters and sometimes, where “fresh” was more than lip service, platters of fresh sliced fruits, ripe enough to eat. Trans fats? Well, everyone wants fries. Everyone wants chocolate chip cookies. Chicken is chicken. We had done our work, and for many, it was sufficient. Now, not so much.

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The food industry has always claimed to be responsive and indeed, some people are still hooked on burgers, fries and all manner of cheese-laden entrees, with mac and cheese the hands down favorite.

Millennials Lead

But the winds of change are blowing and the Millennials are leading the pack. They are concerned about creature comforts and partitionless offices to make sharing ideas and inspiration immediately available. They also are concerned about fitness.

Technology may be the blame or the blessing, but it has brought to everyone with a smart phone or computer the ability to track their health. “Wearable technology” means they can – and do – track the steps they take each day (how about 10,000 to keep up?). They can – and do – track carbs, calories, how many glasses of water they consume.

Fitbit, Nike Fuel Band, Jawbone and the Apple Watch will sync data to your computer or phone. The Fitbit wearable device leads, accounting for over 50% of the three million wearable fitness devices in the year 2013 to 2014.

The young and not so young who are far more aware of how their daily eating habits impinge directly on their weight, sense of well being and ability to tolerate stress, are beginning to get it.

Lunch As Main Meal

For many, lunch is the main meal of the day. A hot meal for lunch means less cooking in the evening. For urbanites, two working members of a family and the oversubscribed, the lunch they rely on at work is their main source of nourishment. If you’re tracking your fitness, the average hamburger and fries becomes a waste of time and effort.

How does the food service operator respond? Several ways and in several different moods. One response: “They say they want it, but no one eats the healthy stuff. They just want burgers and fries.” Or, “It’s going to cost us a lot more money to offer free range this and organic that.” No and yes, but.

However, the media has been helping. It’s impossible not to hear what’s being said. And it was said at least 60 years ago by nutritionist Gaylord Hauser: “You are what you eat.” Now this simple phrase has become a part of the consciousness of the general public.

You can follow Michael Pollan (“The Omnivore’s Dilemma”, “Cooked: A Natural History”), Jane Brody (*New York Times* health columnist, “Jane Brody’s Good Food Book”) and dozens of other authors and journalists bringing good and positive information to the public.

Customers Find Alternatives

How the operator responds to the changing awareness and needs will be in his own hands. But if he looks up from the balance sheet that desperately wants to keep those food costs down, he will see the customer is on line at dozens of fast casual restaurants who are responding.

The chain, “Chopp’d” which serves a dozen varieties or more of chopped greens with a dozen or more protein and fruit toppings, is so swamped with people at lunch that the lines are spilling out onto the street. In midtown Manhattan, the Subway chain has announced it will serve any of its six- inch subs as a chopped salad, minus the bread.

Addressing Diet Needs

In other words, New Yorkers can now get a chopped salad just about anywhere! But this surge in interesting, delicious, well prepared salads is not often found in campus or corporate dining centers.

Why not? Why not give the customer what he wants and watch sales go up? Why don’t we have menus that address the needs of the 29 million diabetics in the US, including the millions of young people who have Type 1 diabetes?

Why don’t we acknowledge the variables that cause so much confusion for the millions who are on a variety of diets and make it easier for them to have a healthy lunch?

Keeping Current

The larger food service companies are making some headway and offering guidelines for counting calories and staying away from fats. However, health science now informs us that we need to pay serious attention to sugar and salt and allow healthy fats to do the work they are intended to do.

Requiring your dining service manager to keep current with the latest nutrition information will help to keep your operation up with your student, faculty and employee customers who are learning how to take better care of themselves.

When they turn to the on-site dining center, they hope to find healthy, well prepared food that reflects what science and nutrition have discovered.

Making sure we can deliver what researchers tell us will protect the health of everyone means we must all be aware of how difficult it is to winnow out the over-processed, over-sprayed and poorly delivered food that is so available.

In the Fall Issue: Bringing healthy meals to the dining center.