

“We have major concerns about our food & beverage operations. We believe they should be more profitable, and we are seeking someone who understands this and can turn them around.”

I was in the final interview stage of what would ultimately turn out to be the beginning of my career in the club management industry, and as I looked across the table at this group of lawyers and doctors who comprised the selection committee for this private club, I suddenly felt at peace. They had outlined the above in response to my question about the biggest challenge they felt the club faced, and I was ready to wow them with my expertise. They were talking my language now!

With over 12 years experience in restaurant and major hotel food & beverage operations, combined with a background in human resources, I had all the answers – I was in!

“Drive revenue, control expenses, and hire the best and the brightest,” I said. The ‘solutions’ to their problems rolled off my tongue – they were duly impressed – I was hired.

FULL DISCLOSURE

I left the room convinced that we were going to dispel this notion that club food & beverage operations were unique and were nothing more than a ‘loss leader’; and that ‘profit’ was a seldom-heard word...

Now, nine years later, and privileged to be running my second club, my peers in the industry would stop reading this article if I was to even try and suggest that I have not, in fact, had to sit before my board of directors on a number of occasions and patiently explain the very unique challenges of day to day food & beverage operations in the club industry!

So, have I failed in my quest, given up, and become disillusioned? Not at all!

While the challenges are real, and a thorough examination of them could easily cover another full article, many of us have come to discover there is a great opportunity to drive additional revenue and improve profitability, and this is through increased use of your venue for special events and non-golf related functions.

Thus...three cheers for the ‘banqueteer’ – get ready to give them what they want!

With careful planning and execution there is a tremendous upside to revenue generated from these events. Many of the variables that challenge our day to day operations are controlled or eliminated – in simple terms, we know who’s coming, when they will arrive, how many there will be, and what we will be serving – so food and labour costs can be calculated ahead of time, eliminating waste and excess.

It’s truly a beautiful thing.

THE TIME IS RIGHT NOW

According to the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association (CRFA), dollar sales for social and contract caterers have been rising consistently since 2001, meaning that the trend is to take special events to smaller and non-hotel venues for a variety of reasons.

As Mike Shapiro, director of sales/marketing, Patisserie Monaco, Toronto, explains, “The food is being upgraded. It’s now as good as the hotels or better. Some of the chefs are customizing the menus, and there are hotels that don’t do that.”

Others suggest that special event and banquet business is moving away from the big hotels because they have become too expensive with high overhead and unionized labour.

Clearly if the opportunity for this business is growing, golf clubs and

operators should be taking a hard look at their own operations and what they can do to take advantage of it.

And most operations can do something, although not all operators are alike. Many clubs have large rooms and clubhouse facilities designed specifically for handling these types of events while still being able to service their day-to-day operations. But others may not readily have the space within the clubhouse to dedicate solely for this purpose.

That stated, even a smaller space, such as a boardroom, can be marketed and sold as a venue for ‘off-site’ corporate business meetings and retreats. A sample itinerary could be: continental breakfast, working lunch, coffee/refreshment breaks during the day. All can add up to additional revenue where labour and food costs are tightly controlled.

Knowing the Answers

BENEFITING FROM
THE BANQUET BUSINESS



GAINING THE ADVANTAGE

One competitive advantage most of us should trumpet is the natural beauty of our settings and surroundings. Whether it is to attract a small corporate meeting or a large wedding, this can, and should, be used to your advantage in any sales or marketing efforts.

Don't have space within the clubhouse to handle bigger functions? If you have room adjacent to the building on the grounds for a marquis tent, you have now increased your potential capacity and created a perfect venue to service a large banquet.

While many banquet events are once in a lifetime events – weddings, graduations, bar and bat mitzvahs, anniversaries, graduations - these occasions (as with any customer service experience) can generate incredible word-of-mouth business if done well.

However, if they are not successful, people remember. Their guests remember. And you will remember to do it better next time!

THE RIGHT STUFF

So, what are the factors that can make a special event or banquet a success, and guarantee that the positive feedback and 'word of mouth' works to grow your business? If you ask a dozen people you can get a dozen answers.

I would suggest there are some key similarities and have developed a couple of theories regarding the hosting of successful events. These theories relate to customer satisfaction and to revenue enhancement for your operations.

The ultimate goal in hospitality is customer satisfaction – in other words, give 'em what they came for. This has even more critical importance in the context of a banquet or special event, particularly larger events like weddings, where there is a tremendous amount of detail involved; from menu development to the test dinner to the suppliers - musicians, photographers and florists.

An event, where the quality of food and hospitality were superb, can easily turn into a failure in the eyes of the client if, in planning or execution, something has been forgotten or assumed.

For instance, in a follow up with a client who had mixed feelings about his daughter's wedding a number of years ago, I discovered that what was lacking was a bit of timing (we were not set up in time) and a pasta station gone awry (instead of make-to-order, there were two ready-made options).

WEB OF COMMUNICATION

As is the case in the hotel industry, and in some larger clubs, there are specific personnel responsible for selling the catering services and quite often there is a disconnect between these individuals and the staff members responsible for providing or delivering the services.

This is where training and communication are so critical to your success. Training helps everybody in the club understand what opportunities exist and how to execute to the clients' expectations. Implementing tools, techniques and processes that have been developed by larger, successful catering operators should be applied to operations of all sizes to ensure that everyone is on the same page.



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Do you, for instance, have a standardized 'function sheet' that provides all of the details of the event, that is updated and reviewed with each department involved in delivering the 'service'? In the example of a wedding, do you have a 'tie down' meeting a few days before the event with the couple, the person who 'sold' the event, and the managers responsible for delivering the services?

VALUE PROPOSITION

The opportunity for revenue enhancement should also be a key focus in training. Whether the 'selling' of events is the responsibility of a sales person, your F&B manager or yourself, the ability to 'up sell' can definitely increase revenue in this segment of your operations.

Clients are willing to pay for things when they can see that their guests will perceive the value, and a superb salesperson that can close deals and up sell is worth their weight in gold.

This again reinforces the necessity for proper training and ensuring you

have the right person for the job. Again, in the example of a couple planning a wedding, are your managers and staff handing the couple a banquet menu, or are they finding out what the bride and groom were dreaming of having, thus purchasing? The former action sets a limitation on expectations and a potential ceiling on price.

For most events, I would propose that you never give a standard menu to a client, but rather develop a custom menu to meet expectations – with custom pricing. The process works, as does all good marketing, by asking the right questions. In the couple's vision of their wedding, what does the food look like? Are they seeing a themed banquet, a multi-station reception or fusion cooking?

Next, be prepared to look at the pricing from competing facilities: other clubs, hotels and banquet facilities. Then put together a proposal that delivers the goods at a price that is competitive, but higher than simply what ordering off a menu would have produced.

ADDING TO THE MIX

The bottom line for your operation's 'bottom line' is that this segment of the market is a great opportunity to add incremental revenue and improved profit margins.

If you are truly committed to the special event and banquet business and can drive additional revenue by making them successful, you may find fewer overall concerns related to your F&B operations, and you could well be the person that "has all the answers".

BRIAN BRUNI

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