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## BUILDING FROM WITHIN

CONTROLLING BUSINESS INSIDE YOUR FOUR WALLS

# BUILDING FROM

## Controlling business in your four walls

**E**conomic uncertainty abounds. The stock market is bucking wildly, dropping below 11,000 one day and then clawing its way back up the next, only to fall again. Consumer confidence is weak, prompting projections of dismal spending in the months ahead. And the unemployment rate remains motionless at 9.1 percent.

Pundits are talking double-dip, and they're not referring to ice cream. And the sad truth is that there's not much you can do about any of it. You can't control the market's turbulence, consumer insecurity, rising commodity prices or chronic joblessness.

Nor can you stop partisan bickering among U.S. lawmakers, solve Greece's financial problems or jumpstart the flatlined American economic recovery.

But, as a restaurateur, you are not helpless, either. In fact, while you can't control the world out there, there are two things you can control: how you respond to what happens around you, and what happens in the universe that exists within your restaurants.

For this special report the editors of Nation's Restaurant News decided to leave the rest of the globe to its own machinations and take a deep look at the microcosms that exist at the unit level.

In Building from within: Controlling business in your four walls, we tune down the noise of the outside world — while, of course, remaining cognizant that it's there — and turn our attention to the world in which your authority and decision making carry weight and your actions have consequences. We'll look at creating better systems, eliminating chaos, focusing on factors with the greatest impact on the customer experience and achieving growth — an objective that never changes


despite the fluctuations of the overall economic environment.

This special report is divided into sections based on the many points of contact, or touchpoints, a restaurant has with its guests over the course of the dining experience. Each story, checklist, fact box and interview contains advice on how to capitalize on those interactions with the objective of growing sales, traffic and repeat business, and improving guest service and customer satisfaction.

We begin the customer experience by exploring ways some operators are enhancing their online connections with potential guests and regulars. Then, in keeping with the four-walls metaphor, we continue the experience just outside the door of the restaurant, walking the perimeter of the parking lot and stepping into the entryway, catching glimpses of the lighting around the building and listening to the music playing softly through the external speakers.

Inside, we share best practices on the ever-crucial greeting and how to make the most of wait times. We also learn some tricks of the bar trade that can help boost incremental sales. Once in the dining room, we delve into the environment, discussing upgrades and enhancements that pay off, as well as learning ways to optimize the interactions between guests and servers through training and technology.

Because food is the axis on which this world turns, we examine ways that operators



# WITHIN

can make the most of their menus, utilizing new items, creative promotions and innovative specials. We also explore the kitchen — a space more open today to customer scrutiny than ever before — and ways that operators can market what goes on in the back-of-the-house.

The drive-thru and the importance of cleanliness also are addressed, as are the steps operators can take to increase their catering business and keep their brands front of mind — even as the customer is walking out the door.

As Jim Sullivan, president of Sullivision.com and an NRN columnist, said, focus on the things you can control, not the things you can't.

“You can control product quality, customer service, same-store sales, who you hire, how well you treat and train them, and how effectively you market your brand and lead your people.”

“So if you want to worry about the economy or government, have at it. But if you want to improve your business, focus most on what is within your means to impact and control.”

Economic uncertainty may abound outside, but inside you've got a whole world in your hands where certainty, stability and growth can reign.

—Robin Lee Allen

## IN THE KITCHEN

# Show off your chef

BY LISA JENNINGS

There was a time when the restaurant kitchen was a mysterious, unseen place where any wizardry that occurred was cloaked safely behind the figurative velvet curtain.

These days, however, chefs and operators across all segments are pulling back that curtain to offer guests a view into their kitchens in ways that have become a fundamental part of the dining experience.

From the fast-casual Chipotle Mexican Grill format that allows guests to build their meals as they walk the preparation line, to the fine-dining chefs who build kitchens with a row of ring-side seats looking in, restaurant operators are trading on the fact that customers love to see the action behind the scenes.

Removing the barrier between chef and guest, however, is not without its challenges.

Kitchen workers must be dressed and trained to be "on stage" in addition to performing their culinary duties, and customer engagement becomes part of their job description.

Still, operators say employees also reap benefits.

"Often these are cooks who are used to spending their working hours in a kitchen basement somewhere, with fluorescent lights and no windows," said

Matt Lyman, founder of the open-kitchen Tender Greens concept in Los Angeles. "In our restaurants they're surrounded by windows, and we have a lot of regulars, so they develop relationships."

Chefs with closed kitchens often reach out to guests by working the dining room floor. And some even invite certain guests into the kitchen for a quick tour.

Years ago, when open kitchens first came into fashion, customers would be wowed that anyone could see what was previously kept hidden, said restaurant consultant Randall Hiatt, president of Fessel International in Costa Mesa, Calif.

Open kitchens have become so common, it's not about the wow factor. Today's operators see the format as a way to communicate core values about their concept, such as cleanliness, freshness of product and hand-crafted cuisine.

Hiatt recommended that operators consider their kitchen format "from the perspective of what they want to communicate as a package."

At the fast-casual, farm-to-fork Tender Greens, Lyman aimed to "take out the middle man: the waiter," so guests could speak directly to the person preparing their meal.

"It's part of the show that a lot of people don't get to see, except on TV," said Lyman. "But they are also seeing the bounty of the produce and the freshness" of



chicken hot off the grill or a just-tossed salad, for example.

At any Tender Greens, guests walk the service line to select their meal. At the newest location in Santa Monica, Calif., that meal might be a grilled-octopus salad with wild arugula, roasted fingerling potatoes, shaved fennel and chickpeas marinated in a grilled-lemon vinaigrette; or chipotle barbecued chicken with Yukon Gold mashed potatoes.

As guests walk the line, Lyman said, "They can say, 'Could I have more sauce with that, or a little more cheese?'"

Although the concept has seven locations with certain core menu items in common, the chef at each restaurant drives menu specials, and almost everything is made in-house — from the jams to the cured bacon — or sourced locally.

"It's labor intensive, but food is served quickly," said Lyman.

Because so much of the cooking is done directly in front of customers, Lyman said the training of staff is very different from that of a closed kitchen, where cooks can yell or curse out of earshot.

"We have to drill it into their heads from the beginning," said Lyman. "They have to think

Fast-casual chain Tender Greens aims to take out the middleman — the server — so guests can interact with those who are preparing the food.

Anderson said the idea stems in part from Habiger's experience as a bartender.

"When the guest sits there and you prepare their drink, you can see the initial reaction," said Anderson.

"There won't be any place to hide. It will be extremely intimate," he added. "But we don't want it to be intimidating." ■

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## AT THE DRIVE-THRU

# Rev up sales

The drive-thru, a decades-old hallmark of many of the most prominent restaurant chains, is getting renewed attention these days as operators realize that small tweaks can translate into big improvements in sales and efficiency.

Whether a drive-thru is part of a new prototype or an established pillar of the business, there are always ways to improve, said founder of Sullivision.com and Nation's Restaurant News columnist Jim Sullivan. Here are several of his tips for revving up sales at the drive-thru window.

**A need for speed:** Make sure all processes are devised for accuracy and speed, with no wasted effort by employees. For example, have a system in place to keep straws and napkins close at hand.

**Training:** Make sure staff members are menu experts so no time is wasted during order taking by unnecessary questions or confusion.

**Data tracking and measurement:** Track and measure data on accuracy and drive-thru speed. Make sure the staff knows their targets and what they need to improve upon.

**Technology:** Digital displays, cashless payment and noise-reducing sound systems have been shown to ease customer anxiety and dramatically reduce transaction times.

**Customer perspective:** Consider what the driver sees and improve any poor areas. Keep signage clear, the building well-maintained and the window exchange area clean.

## THROUGHOUT THE RESTAURANT

# Keep it clean

The restroom gets a lot of the attention when it comes to talking about consumers' desire for a dirt-free restaurant, but the truth is your customers are watching for cleanliness cues throughout the operation. The strong emphasis diners place on the appearance of restaurants was underscored in Nation's Restaurant News' recent Consumer Picks survey, conducted by WD Partners of Dublin, Ohio, and released last month. The survey, which polled more than 5,000 people this summer, offers rare access into the mind of the post-recession consumer, and the message was clear: If you want to please today's

diner, don't cut corners on cleanliness.

In the survey, diners in three segments ranked nine attributes in order of importance: Atmosphere, Cleanliness, Food Quality, Menu Variety, Reputation, Likelihood to Recommend to Others, Likelihood to Return, Service and Value. Cleanliness ranked at or near the top in every case, outranking Value and, in some cases, even Food Quality.

● **Casual dining:** Cleanliness finished second in the category, with a score only slightly lower than the most important attribute, Food Quality.

● **Family dining:** Cleanliness tied for first place, sharing the position with Food Quality.

● **Limited service:** Cleanliness was declared the most important attribute of the dining experience for this segment, beating out all eight other attributes. ■