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To Build a Kitchen or Not to Build a Kitchen

Tara Bliss and Joyce Fasano

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Before making your decision, determine expectations from both the client and consumer side.

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I'm putting in a new building or renovating an existing one and I want foodservice. Do I really need to build a kitchen? This question has come up more frequently in the past two years.

A designated planning committee often makes design decisions without advisement from someone familiar with foodservice operations. If a college or corporate campus has multiple kitchens, careful operational planning may allow for a new grab-and-go venue or small coffee counter to be supported by an on-site kitchen or commissary. However, when the "owner" has no kitchen on site, the decision creates a whole new dilemma.

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In a situation that is typical for most management consultants, the facility decisions have been made, the site is under construction and then we are called to help find an operator. When we begin asking questions, we learn:

- The CEO promised to have the best Neapolitan pizza in town in the new café (with no ventilation or pizza oven?);
- The company wants to promote healthful food in its employee café, suggesting made-to-order stir-fry with fresh, organic veggies with a range of lean protein options (and no kitchen?);
- The medical clinic wants to serve doctors and staff plus the patients and visiting families. Patients may be at the clinic for 12 to 16 hours a day and the medical team works around the clock. The facility would like to serve freshly grilled salmon, fresh garden soups, tossed-to-order salads with grilled organic chicken or broiled shrimp, emphasizing the importance of fresh and cooked to order (with no stove, grill or ventilation system?).

There are many more examples, but you get the point. The expectations are high, but the ability to deliver is severely restricted by the lack of a full-service kitchen anywhere on site.

There are two big challenges with a project of this nature. First, operators expect a kitchen to successfully operate a quality café, regardless of size, and meet their clients' first-class vision of freshly prepared foods that are attractively merchandised and finished to order. Attempting to operate a first-class café without a kitchen causes significant loss in food quality and freshness, limits the operator's ability to provide variety and ultimately falls short of customer expectations—tarnishing the operator's reputation. For these reasons, many high-end operators refuse to operate programs without kitchens.

In three recent situations, the high-end vendors that clients wanted were unwilling to come to the table without a kitchen. The outcomes?

- One client was willing to go back and build a one-story addition, enabling him to add a kitchen and install a ventilation system rather than venting through eight floors of the main office structure.
- A second client installed ventless equipment at a substantial cost to allow minimal on-site cooking.
- The third salvaged an old kitchen scheduled to be demolished in a renovation and used it to support the new café two levels up.

Although there was ultimately a solution in each case, the clients couldn't execute their dream dining program without considerable additional cost and heartache.

The second major challenge: even if an operator is willing to entertain the possibility of operating a kitchenless café, many don't have sufficient and available commissary space to accommodate the volume and desired menu variety. Recently a contractor who was willing to entertain a kitchenless operation had four other accounts near the client's new café. Problem solved, right? Think again. All four neighboring companies declined to allow the contractor to service another client's site from their kitchens. The neighboring companies were concerned with liability issues, diverted use of company assets, utility costs and essentially felt that if the client wanted a café, he should invest in his own kitchen. Even when a caterer with available commissary space is willing to take on a kitchenless client, the menu is often much more limited than what the client imagined.

7 Signs You Will Need to Build a Kitchen

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The intent is not to scare you into building a kitchen anytime foodservice is required, but rather to help you make the to-have-or-not-have-a-kitchen decision with a full understanding of the financial and operational implications. As a guide, here are some indications that a proposed dining venue may require a kitchen.

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Signs You Will Need to Build a Kitchen

- 1 You intend to serve fresh, made-to-order salads and sandwiches, hot grilled options, and customized pizzas.
- 2 You want to provide a wide menu variety to keep the dining experience exciting.
- 3 Employees work around the clock and you want to provide fuel from breakfast through late-night dinner.
- 4 You want the flexibility to accommodate special visitors and prepare fresh meals to meet their dietary preferences.
- 5 Neither your company nor contractor have available commissary capacity.
- 6 There's available commissary capacity, but no delivery access to the building throughout the day.
- 7 You're testing foodservice demand with a small venue, but may want to expand later.



Reality Check:
Changing your mind or expanding a concept may require adding a ventilation system through a multi-story building, which is very expensive.

Discussing your dining concept and operational expectations can tease out information and help accurately determine your kitchen requirements. We would advise those considering any dining facility to bring in someone familiar with dining operations as early as possible, if even to simply be a sounding board for your vision. Critically and thoughtfully evaluating your dining goals on the front end saves time and money, and ensures the foundation for a positive dining experience whereby a contract management firm can successfully meet and exceed your dream dining operation.

Tara Bliss is a project analyst at Brailsford & Dunlavey and can be reached at tbliss@programmanagers.com. Joyce Fasano, FSCI is a vice president at Brailsford & Dunlavey and can be reached at jfasano@programmanagers.com. Brailsford & Dunlavey is a program

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