

Guest Editorial

Culinary Imagination: The Essential Ingredient in Food and Beverage Management

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Despite major changes in consumption habits, particularly in relation to meal eating patterns, (Mikela, 2000) 'remarkably little has been written on consumer choice in a hospitality industry context' (Clark & Wood 1999, p. 317). Indeed a decade has now passed since Meiselman (1996) expressed concern that the entire commercial catering sector was under-researched, a situation that was recently confirmed by O'Mahony and Hall (2007) who note that little research has been conducted into the factors that influence food choice or related food-consumption behaviour.

In the meantime, restaurateurs continue to invest with little understanding of the factors that can assist in extending the life cycle of their businesses, chain hotels suffer from product malaise and the commercial catering sector relies heavily on captive markets to extract maximum profit, rather than engaging in price sensitivity research that can optimise product pricing, increase demand and develop customer loyalty.

These are but a few of the issues confronting today's food and beverage manager. In this special issue of the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* many more are evident in the contributions received from a plethora of distinguished scholars whose perspectives embrace a variety of academic disciplines. Their articles highlight the current state of play in food and beverage research, reporting on the symbolism and 'meaning' of

wine; the added value provided by increasing employee/customer interactions; legal issues, including duty of care in hospitality provision; the benefits of mass customisation to flight catering; the influence of vanity and values in women's food preferences; and a comprehensive insight into the history and progress of food and beverage research.

The need for empirical research to support food and beverage management has been reinforced by Riley (2000) and by Wood (2000) who expose a number of challenges faced by international chain hotels in the United Kingdom (UK). Riley (2000), for example, posed the question 'can hotel restaurants ever be profitable?' Both Riley and Dr Roy Wood, who has published extensively in food and beverage management, lament the decline of hotel dining in this context. As Wood advises in this publication, apart from a few hotels that are food led, the majority make their money from room sales.

While perhaps reducing some of the complexity of managing perishable ingredients, dealing with increasing food regulations and the prickly demeanours of some food preparation staff, this minimalist approach to food and beverage provision is

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unsustainable. Fyall and Spyriadis (2003) advise, for example, that as a result of increasing competition in the global environment, '... international hotel chains need to adopt a more sophisticated approach to strategic marketing and planning' (2003, p. 108). With this in mind Riley notes that while international hotel chains have many advantages in terms of marketing economies of scale, '... hotel restaurants need to capture their local market as well as their guest market to achieve and sustain profitability' (Riley 2000, p. 113).

International chain hotels in Australia struggle with the same issues. The majority, for example, have abandoned fine dining altogether and reduced their food and beverage outlets to casual dining with the main emphasis on providing breakfast and 24-hour room service. A lack of research into customer needs, coupled with an unyielding commitment to a product focus, have contributed to their current difficulties.

Lack of local level research by international chain hotels is neither a new nor an unfounded notion. Indeed, some years ago Renaghan (1993) asserted that research is not and has never been part of the corporate culture. He went on to note that although hotel corporations have marketing departments their concentration is on sales and that '... many international hospitality companies do not really "do" any marketing at all' (p. 165).

Renaghan, of course, is discussing the fundamental distinction between a product and a market focus. International chain hotels are foremost among the hospitality firms that concentrate on revenue generation through increased sales, rather than by offering distinctive products and services that satisfy the needs of their customers. According to Renaghan (1995) '... firms that become customer oriented are ones that not only understand customer needs but have used that knowledge to focus their resources, energy and efforts in their quest for growth and profit' (p. 167).

Another core feature of market-orientated organisations is that they offer a product or service that is distinctively different to that of their competitors. Most people would agree, however, that there is little to distinguish one international hotel chain's brand from another. For this reason the food and beverage offerings at all major chain hotels are predictable.

Indeed, anyone who has stayed at a four- or five-star chain hotel could predict what will be on the menu, regardless of the brand name at the hotel entrance. Consider the room service menu for a moment and you can bet that the club sandwich, soup of the day and hamburger will be there. Little has changed in 20 years except perhaps the descriptions have become more flowery. In answering Riley's earlier question, one might begin by asking how these products got on to the menu in the first place? Who decided that French fries placed under a cloche, carried across hotel corridors and up several floors from the kitchen to the guest's room was a good idea? More importantly, if these are dishes guests really want, surely some attempts at getting the product to the customer in peak condition should be a part of the ongoing research process. Thus the need for innovation and/or reflection and investment in product development should be core components of the food and beverage research agenda.

Local Level Constraints to International Hotel Management

It should be acknowledged that international hotel chains operate in a difficult environment. They manage hotels on behalf of owners who are generally corporate investors with little interest and no experience in hotel operations. In many cases, capital investment is minimised so that end of year results show a favourable return on investment for shareholders. Owners' main concerns are to keep overheads and operating costs, which are normally charged back to the local properties by international hotel corporations, at a

minimum level. As a result, investment in consumer behaviour research has been negligible and where research does occur it is reactive and focused on improving sales of the existing product, rather than new product development.

Within the food and beverage department new ways are sought to reduce costs, which inevitably result in a reduction in menu choice, thus further limiting the product range. A move towards partially prepared products and buying in whole courses such as pre-made desserts is also evident. This results in less distinction in the product range.

In attempts to reduce labour costs the majority of hotels have opted for the full buffet breakfast — a hearty but extremely wasteful alternative. Kitchen performance is still monitored on the basis of a prescribed food cost percentage, and food and beverage management has been reduced to policing financial performance goals. As a result, any creative management dimensions are removed and the entire department presents a mundane and stressful career option.

This lack of a creative, reflective approach to management, coupled with a lack of local level initiatives, has allowed others to capture the market in areas that are more desirable to consumers. Hotels have not managed to exploit the healthy approach to eating and drinking that is occurring all around them, for example. Instead, franchisees with little training in food production or service have capitalised on the penchant for nourishing vitamin drinks. The health conscious trend is a key selling point for food retailers (i.e., grocery stores and supermarkets) who promote low fat, low carbohydrate food alternatives, yet chain hotel menus appear to have missed the mark altogether, with few menus presenting guests with even basic information on the methods of cookery employed in food preparation (e.g., healthy styles such as grilling, poaching, steaming and stir-frying).

Hospitality Management Education

In his article in this issue Wood provides a comprehensive description of hospitality management education from a UK perspective. Nevertheless, many of the issues that he reports on are also of international significance. In Australia, for example, there are a raft of hospitality management courses at both degree and vocational level and the bright young women and men that graduate from these programs can take much of the credit for improving the service and professionalism of the Australian hospitality industry. With nearly 50% of all hospitality jobs provided by four- and five-star hotels, however, there appears to be little improvement in the management of hotel food and beverage departments.

One explanation for this is that food and beverage management in international chain hotels is characterised by rigid adherence to systems and processes that originate overseas and this has stifled the opportunity for creativity. This has also limited its appeal as a career option for university graduates, the majority of whom choose rooms division as the pathway to promotion. This lack of food and beverage experience means that, all too often, managers have little practical understanding of the food and beverage department when they reach general manager level and so the cycle continues.

As Wood notes in his article, the hospitality curriculum adds to this dilemma because ‘... in the context of a predominant “hands on” concept of food and beverage education, tradition has been valorised at the expense of innovation’. The ongoing debate within the hospitality management field about the ability of the hospitality management curriculum to prepare students for the challenges of today’s hospitality industry presents an opportunity for educational institutions to tackle this problem (Lashley & Morrison, 2000; Morrison & O’Mahony, 2002, 2003; Wood, 2000). Airey and Tribe (2000), in particular, have questioned the extent to which traditional hospitality management higher education prepares

students to be able to think outside existing practices and paradigms. From a North American perspective Barrows and Bosselman (1999) assert that the international hospitality industry and business environment are so dynamic it is unrealistic to assume that curriculum content can accurately reflect current industry practices. As Morrison and O'Mahony (2002, p. 196) advise '... there is potential that traditional management may be challenged, inherited rituals questioned, and breakout from historical mindsets achieved to revitalise the future rather than simply replicate the past'. In the dynamic environment of the current knowledge economy, where businesses that are able to innovate and adjust to the changing market place emerge as market leaders, this move from operational to critical enquiry is essential.

There are opportunities to put the sizzle back into the food and beverage sector by conducting local level research in order to identify the factors that influence customers in the purchasing and consumption of food and drink, and by engaging in reflective management practice in order to develop products and services that guests really want and are prepared to pay for. The development and offering of new and innovative products will also generate a vibrant, creative workplace and assist in constructing a guest-centred culture. Consequently, it is argued that as much emphasis should be placed on these elements of food and beverage management as is currently placed on inventory control and the maintenance of food cost percentages.

In This Issue

In responding to the dramatic social and technological changes that have occurred worldwide, hospitality, as we know it, can no longer be confined to hospitality management. Such developments require a new school of thought, one that is better equipped to think through the daunting complexities of our contemporary world. Roy Wood's article on the future of food and beverage management research pro-

vides a compelling backdrop to many of the articles in this current issue. Wood's suggestion that such management research needs to be linked, among other things, to the broader field of the 'social' is illustrated in the article by Finkelstein and Quiazon. Their aptly titled 'Liquid Images' provides a glimpse into the visuality of the wine label and shows that it is not so much about the material qualities of the wine label per se, but the role of the cultural imaginary in transforming wine drinking in fluid and diverse ways.

In contrast to the liquid imagery of the wine label, Stierand and Sandt examine the potential value of increased visibility of haute cuisine service staff. They report that increasing employee–customer interactions could be the key to successful service delivery. At the heart of Stierand and Sandt's proposition is that knowledgeable hospitality service staff will develop a relationship with customers, thus enhancing customer loyalty. Borchgrevink, Sciarini and Susskind's article about hot beverages at quick service drive thru windows illustrates the consequences for service providers when such a relationship breaks down. Explaining the dimensions and consequences of the notorious McDonald's coffee-scalding lawsuit, Borchgrevink, Sciarini and Susskind reflect on duty of care, noting that safe serving temperatures for hot beverages have now been established. As such, their article has far wider implications for hospitality management than one might expect. In addition, this research supports the view that the rapidly changing context and meaning of the culinary experience needs to be understood at a number of levels and that emerging contingencies must be catered for.

Firmly situated within management research, Chang and Jones's article provides further insights into the complexity of catering operations. They establish the necessity for, and value of, mass customisation (MC) in flight catering, followed by a series of insights into how it is applied within that sector. The propensity to rely on MC as a cost cutting measure rein-

forces the current orientation of food and beverage management noted earlier, while the lack of reliable information noted in the limitations of their study shows how research, or more specifically data collection, is a vital input in flight catering.

Implications for further research are also evident in the contribution by O'Mahony and Hall. The insights provided in the qualitative research that they conducted, for example, shows how little we really know about the preferences of diners. What is clear, however, is that dining is context-dependent, with differences in the perspective that diners bring to a variety of dining occasions. In some instances, it was found that diners who are concerned about health and physical appearance will ignore their understanding of the effect of particular foods on physical appearance. Instead, on certain occasions they will consume dishes that are high in fat and calories with the intention of dieting or engaging in physical activity afterwards.

Finally, Robinson's article begins by advocating an interdisciplinary approach to food and beverage management to complement operational issues. He explains how historical research can provide an understanding of contemporary social behaviour. More importantly, however, his article provides evidence that studies of society can assist in pinpointing the drivers of consumer demand, reinforcing the view that studies of social trends can assist restaurateurs to predict for future consumption behaviour.

Clearly, the contributions published in this issue show that food and beverage operations research is but one dimension of a larger hospitality landscape. Roy Wood's article provides the perfect summary when he notes that 'if a coherent, rational and justifiable agenda for future food and beverage management research is to be evolved, then it is necessary to have some deeper understanding of the potential benefits of establishing linkages with other traditions of inquiry'. I commend this collection of articles to you in the knowledge that the topics, themes and insights

contained within them will be of value to both academics and industry practitioners.

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