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Past, Present, and Future: The Food Service Industry and Its Changes

Herman E. Zaccarelli Brother
Purdue University, null@purdue.edu

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Past, Present, and Future: The Food Service Industry and Its Changes

Abstract

In the article - Past, Present, and Future: The Food Service Industry and Its Changes - by Brother Herman E. Zaccarelli, International Director, Restaurant, Hotel and Institutional Management Institute at Purdue University, Brother Zaccarelli initially states: "Educators play an important role in the evolution of the food service industry. The author discusses that evolution and suggests how educators can be change agents along with management in that evolutionary progression."

The author goes on to wax philosophically, as well as speak generically about the food service industry; to why it offers fascinating and rewarding careers. Additionally, he writes about the influence educators have on students in this regard.

"Educators can speak about how the food service industry has benefited them both personally and professionally," says Brother Zaccarelli. "We get excited about alerting students to the many opportunities and, in fact, serve as "salespersons" for the industry to whoever (school administrators, legislators, and peers in the educational institution) will listen."

Brother Zaccarelli also speaks to growth and changes in food service, and even more importantly about the people and faces behind everything that food service, and hospitality in general comprise. The author will have you know, that people are what drive an educator.

"What makes the food service industry so great? At the heart of this question's answer is people: the people whom it serves in institutional and commercial operations of all types; the people who work within it; the people who provide the goods, services, and equipment to it; the people who study it," says Brother Zaccarelli. "All of these groups have, of course, a vested personal and/or professional interest in seeing our industry improve."

Another concept the author would like you to absorb, and it's even more so true today than yesterday, is the prevalence of convergence and divergence within food service.

For food service and beyond, it is the common denominators and differences that make the hospitality-food service industry so dynamic and vibrant. These are the winds of change presented to an educator who wants to have a positive impact on students.

The author warns that the many elements involved in the food service industry conspire to erode quality of service in an industry that is also persistently expanding, and whose cornerstone principles are underpinned by service itself.

"The three concerns addressed - quality, employees, and marketing - are intimately related," Brother Zaccarelli says in stripping-down the industry to bare essentials. He defines and addresses the issues related to each with an eye toward how education can reconcile said issues.

Keywords

Brother Herman E. Zaccarelli, Past, Present, and Future: The Food Service Industry and Its Changes, Hospitality education, Educators, Quality, Employees, Marketing

Past, Present, and Future: The Food Service Industry and Its Changes

by
Brother Herman E. Zaccarelli
International Director
Restaurant, Hotel and
Institutional Management Institute
Purdue University

Educators play an important role in the evolution of the food service industry. The author discusses that evolution and suggests how educators can be change agents along with management in that evolutionary progression.

The food service industry is broad and complicated. Most hospitality educators understand something about its organizational status, the requirements imposed by basic operating procedure, and the evolution of the industry. We also can cite long scenarios about how it has helped in the service of mankind.

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What makes the industry so great? At the heart of this question's answer is people: the people whom it serves in institutional and commercial operations of all types; the people who work within it; the people who provide the goods, services, and equipment to it; the people who study it. All of these groups have, of course, a vested personal and/or professional interest in seeing our industry improve.

How long will the fast-paced change of recent years continue? How will the industry change? What will — and/or should — be the role of educators in the evolution (revolution?) of the food service industry?

Many industry observers have been around a long time. They probably recall attending a seminar session or reading a trade journal article 15 or more years ago and learning about food services in the future (1980 or 1985). Many of us heard ideas such as, "We'll all be eating pills," or "Technology will catch up — machines will replace people." Growth was predicted in almost every segment of the food service industry except the fast food sector — it didn't even exist 30 years ago. Well, hindsight and current events point out that these and similar predictions were not correct.

When we discuss technological and other trends most likely to impact upon food services, we must distinguish between two concepts: dreams

(good thoughts about what we would like to see in the future) and visions (one's conscious views about what we actually think we'll see). One can be optimistic and believe that the industry will improve because of internal pressures. However, we must also recognize that a common thread in many changes is the pressure created by laws, by our publics, by changing world conditions, etc. Isn't there a way that the industry can look toward the future and take a more assertive, proactive role in shaping it?

Part of the problem with discussing the food service industry is, of course, its breadth and depth and the many different factors affecting specific segments. Consider, for example, the health care segment — and the laws, Diagnostic Related Groups (DRGs), reimbursement plans, spiraling costs, trends to socialized medicine, etc., which are creating changes in the way that health care dietary services are delivered.

What about the concerns in the education segment where we find (a) decreasing numbers of school-aged students and, at the same time, (b) increasing emphasis on continuing education experiences for adults and, of course, (c) the need to continually teach new vocations and professions to people of all ages.

What about the business and industry segment? Will robotics decrease the number of people to be fed in traditional in-plant feeding operations, and everywhere else where people work?

And then we get to the commercial segment — where hotels are being built in cities that already have too many hotel rooms and, at the same time, where chains dominate the restaurant industry. Dram shop and related liquor liability concerns are playing havoc with operators' historical philosophy about serving — and with their liability insurance costs and resulting profit levels as well.

Yes, the food service industry is big — and complex — and challenging — and changing — and difficult to conceptualize now — let alone in the future.

There are three issues which, one way or the other, are likely to be in the forefront of changes in the industry for many years to come.

Quality Is Being Emphasized In Business

The first issue relates to quality. One reason that we are not all “dining” on pills today is not primarily technical but rather quality-related. Quality — the elusive concept of inherent excellence and superiority — has often been overlooked but is now being emphasized in the hospitality industry. The goals of Cesar Ritz, of Escoffier, and of others in a cadre of those who were not satisfied until the very best product or service could be offered must be re-examined and reconsidered and meshed with the goals of today's food service industry.

One's vision here is not “gourmet hamburgers” or “classic cuisine nourishments.” Rather, it is an attitudinal concern that food service operators must not be satisfied until they are meeting the total aesthetic needs of the markets being served. Think of the Savoy Hotel in London, Delmonico's famous New York restaurants in the 1800s, London's Reform Club, the London Chop House in Detroit, and the Drake Hotel in Chicago. What can a food service manager do to turn the operation into “quality milestones” such as these in the minds of one's clients,

residents, and guests?

People Must Be Of Concern To Industry

The place to start is to address those concerns related to what will precipitate change in our industry; this involves the second basic issue, the people — primarily those who work in the food service industry. There must be a philosophy etched in the minds of people who aspire to provide quality, and this attitude will precede its achievement. Producing quality products and service cannot occur without teamwork based on example and inspiration.

In many respects, the food service industry is currently in the dark ages when it comes to its employees. There is — and will continue to be — a shortage of staff members at all organizational levels, and this occurs in times of high unemployment levels! For an extreme example, many prisoners, when given a choice between cooking in food service or remaining in their confining cells, opt for the latter. Industry struggles to keep minimum wages low (and even fights to lower them) and supervisors are trained to be task — not people — centered. Training programs to help staff members grow with the organization are seldom viable, even when carefully planned. The obvious result — staff members whose practices and concerns often run counter to the property's and the guests' values — has long plagued the industry and, unfortunately, this problem is likely to continue in the future.

Markets Must Be Carefully Analyzed

A third basic concern which is integral to the future of our industry, marketing, also addresses people — the recipients of our food services. The commercial (for profit) segment of the industry is starting to do a fair job of recognizing and considering the guests when business decisions are made. The institutional (not-for-profit) sector is, sadly, far behind in the need to look to what it is doing from the patients' or residents' perspective. Food service operations of all types must recognize that, to survive, more must be done besides physically providing food and beverage products to assorted clients. There are deeper psychological and sociological reasons why people dine in any type of food service operation. What are these? How can we better meet these wants and needs of the markets which are being served?

And now, you see, we are right back to quality. The three concerns addressed — quality, employees, and marketing — are intimately related. One attains quality objectives through staff; one defines quality from the guests' perspective. In effect, then, quality does not only mean products and services best suited for their intended purpose; it also means exemplary relationships with food service employees and guests. Said another way, then, perhaps the single largest concern which must be addressed by — and which, in turn, will shape — the food service industry relates to the need for an expanded definition of quality.

It is, of course, relatively easy to speculate about the future and how the industry must change to cope with it. It is infinitely more difficult to implement changes which may be needed. Change must be preceded with an awareness that a problem exists. Most of us working in the industry today in almost any position are overtly aware of these problems.

But how exactly can these problems be defined — and what exactly should be done about them? Having made these points, what's next in our efforts to define and better cope with pressures confronting our industry? Some short-range predictions about the industry for the next several years are in order.

Change Is Inherent In The Industry

Let's start by considering commercial food and beverage service operations — specifically those in restaurants and hotels. First of all, the name of the game is change. There surely will always be a place for the independent operator who offers quality and value for guests. However, many of these properties will give way to the multi-unit companies in much the same way that the small “mom and pop” neighborhood grocery store has given way to the supermarket giants. On a more specific scale, themes — both in environments and in food items — are likely to be short-lived — almost faddish — and turn around fast. Environments (such as disco) and food items (such as quiche and potato skins) may not last long enough to compensate for investment requirements. Atmosphere will be played down. The amount of capital required to go into new operations will be less; square footage and expensive furnishings will be sacrificed for a more simplistic and back-to-basics approach. Computerization of many management and production functions will, of course, continue. The pressure for development and application of new management techniques to retain a competitive edge will increase. Aspects of the art and science of management used in other industries will quickly be applied to commercial food service operations.

What about the institutional segment of our industry? First, there is likely to be an increase in the incidence of for-profit food service management companies serving health care and educational facilities. These companies have no secrets to sell — only the application of basic management systems which have not been effectively applied in many self-operated facilities.

Before leaving this topic, we must address cost containment and the efforts which are currently being taken to mitigate the impact of reduced government dollars to fund health and education programs. There is no doubt that these efforts are necessary in many operations; there is a lot of fat in the operating budgets of poorly-operated dietary services. However, it is one thing for a food service consultant to make ambiguous statements concerning cost containment in institutions during short monthly visitations. It is quite another to be struggling daily in the kitchen with the challenge to serve two masters: institutional cost containment goals and patient/resident/student satisfaction. Perhaps the time has arrived to decrease the consultant fees and to increase the food service staff's wages!

Educators Have A Role In Changing The Industry

What might be elements in an educator's action plan to address quality, employee, and marketing concerns which impact on the future of the food service industry? These issues must be addressed through the educational process. (Wouldn't an educator be expected to say this?) On the other hand, haven't educators contributed to past, current, and future

problems which the industry faces? Exactly how do we currently teach young people aspiring to leadership positions within the industry — or adults seeking retraining or upgrading proficiencies — to define and recognize quality? Where — and how — do educators develop attitudes of concern for quality in products, services, and work? Where do educators teach our students how to really manage people, to recognize employees as, first, individuals, to define and mesh organizational goals with the personal needs of employees?

And what about procedures for change? The process of learning, unlearning, and relearning is, at best, difficult. Food service industry employees at all organizational levels must do this constantly. Where do they learn how? Where do educators teach people how to communicate and understand? Where do we even teach people about the industry that they are going to enter? (Studies consistently show that many young people leave the industry soon after entering it because they weren't aware of exactly what it was all about.)

So, the list of shortcomings within the educational domain can continue, but the point is, what will educators do about it? What can we do to improve educational programs to help meet the needs of the food service industry in the future? Maybe we should form a long range task force to study the problem and make recommendations. This is a facetious suggestion — because that can never work! What we really need is, first, a sincerity of purpose, and, second, communication between all segments of this vast industry.

When this has been done in the past, it has frequently focused on physical skill competencies. Most of the questions posed above, however, do not relate to physical skills. They are rather attitudinal and value-centered. Professional associations within the educational community and the food service industry must begin communicating; representatives must define these issues and develop strategies to resolve them. With this multi-sided approach, the process of resolving these problems can be expedited. Experienced educators will likely appreciate and act favorably upon defensible recommendations made by their peers and by industry. This input can help change course and program content — if not academic curricula themselves.

Currently, top management staff in the industry working in their own properties can plant the seeds of recognition that quality, employees, and the marketplace must have a place in continued strength and growth. This is, perhaps, where technology can help. Observers know what some of the problems are — and others can be defined. The industry needs help in resolving them. Isn't that what a good manager does? He/she becomes aware of problems and, working with a background of knowledge, common sense, and experience, solves problems by a process involving developing, implementing, evaluating, and fine-tuning ideas. Problems can be resolved. Also, since at their most basic level the many segments of the industry are similar and certainly share many of the same problems, effective problem resolution strategies can be shared.

In effect, then, a cycle of industry improvement can be established. On the one side, the educational community can generate professionals for the industry who can make a contribution to the resolution of 21st

century problems. At the same time, industry practitioners can work from within — and many of their ideas will, hopefully, make their way into the textbooks and classrooms of the educational facility. If quality — broadly defined — is recognized to be one of the most serious problems facing the food service industry — which it is — then education and communication is the process which must be used to resolve the problem. Some of us talk every day but seldom listen, and even fewer frequently understand. The food service industry is going to evolve; it is going to move ahead. Academic and management professionals within the industry should be pulling it forward, and not be pushed from behind.