

Top

10

Steps

to Building an

Effective

Food Merchandising Program

By Diane Chiasson

Running a foodservice operation takes much more than just displaying the regulars like the daily special. As an operator, you must think of what will lure your customers into your operation and it has to be creative enough that they will be coming for years to come. Freshness is an obvious key factor and should not be overlooked. Nothing should be displayed that has not been prepared that day. Visual food merchandising is the fine art of bringing your products to life through eye-catching food merchandising, where the vision of freshness, colour, quality and quantity is key to any foodservice operation's success. Menu development, plate presentation, hand chosen props, appropriate lighting, pleasing packaging, signage that sells, customer service and selling are also part of this strategic process. When done properly visual food merchandising can increase your sales significantly. Here are ten steps to help you create a fabulous looking and mouthwatering foodservice facility.

1 Research rituals

It is important that you know your customer inside out, as you want to serve them as best as possible. Survey your current customers to see what they think of your selection. Ask them what they like and what they think you could do better. Are your items as fresh as they could be? Is your staff as friendly and helpful as they could be? It is also equally crucial to research the competition so that you are always one step ahead of them.

2 If you build it, they will come

Yes, this is an old saying but nothing could be closer to the truth. Operators should build their food displays so customers can see them from across the facility. Use nothing but the freshest ingredients and colourful food items in your display. Display food items such as meat dishes, salads and vegetables using unique plates, dishes and rattan baskets. Use fresh fruits, fresh and dried flowers, in addition to ears of wheat and corn to add to your displays. Custom design wood tilted racks to display breads, pies and danishes so your customers' mouth will be watering from the minute they walk in the door. Do not forget to change your display every 10 days, and label each item so customers know what they are buying. Your display could be the best one on the block, but your customers will get bored of it if they see the same thing every time they enter your facility.

3 Creating color eye-catchers

Color is one of the most important factors when dealing with food displays. Because most of the colours in food items tend to be browns and beiges, it is necessary to pump up your operation with bright colours such as red, orange, or yellow, that will complement any bakery you build. Look at what items you have on hand in the kitchen, pantry and stockrooms that might add mouthwatering substance to your display.

4 Have fun with cross-merchandising

Cross-merchandising is a unique way for you to get your point across. Items grouped together such as sandwiches and soups enhance the sales of both items and ultimately you sell more. When displaying specialty breads, do not be afraid to merchandise the ingredients as well. Display fresh herb breads near bunches of fresh herbs. Then cut up a few of the loaves so customers can capture the taste. Or, cross-merchandise bakery items with the deli and salad counters. Coffee is the next best thing to display with any bakery item - display beautiful packages of coffee next to your mouthwatering bakery items and they will be flying off the shelves. Also, try cream cheese and bagels, focaccia bread with balsamic vinegar and olive oil, or fruit and lemon cakes with whipped cream.

5

Selling with signage

It is important to be clean, concise and to the point when designing the signage for your operation. Make it as easy as possible for customers to purchase food items by providing proper signage. After all, the reason for putting up a sign in the first place is to inform your customers about your products so they will buy them! Signage can be displayed in all shapes and sizes and should be used accordingly. Use small chalkboard signs for dessert items and bigger signs for sectioned areas of your operation. If you insist on handwriting your signs, be sure to make them legible and graphically appealing.

6

Lively lighting

Lighting plays a very important role when it comes to food items. It should be an aspect you think of at all times when designing your food displays because it helps to sell your products. Do not over- or under-light key areas of your facility. Lighting is meant to add life to your food products, while showing off the details of your products. Strive for a warm, comfortable environment that encourages sales. While you will not be asked to conceive and implement a lighting system, you will be asked to keep an eye on lighting systems to ensure cleanliness, accuracy of beam, and that burned out bulbs are identified and replaced immediately.

7

Make it spotless

Cleanliness will help to ensure your customer will come back for more of your tasty products. The last thing a customer wants to find is a dusty food counter or a spotty sneeze guard. This goes for three-tier displays, display racks, utensils, shelves and employee uniforms. Ensure your staff wears hairnets, hats and disposable gloves while handling all food. Post signage that lets customers know you are in control of your cleanliness.

8

Keep them stocked up

Keeping an eye on your inventory is pertinent to running a successful foodservice facility. Make sure to have all the favourite items in stock at all times, in addition to some new and improved items that are sure to knock your competitors off their feet. Feel free to try a variety of items, as your customers will get bored of the same items over and over. Again, keep in mind your customer base. Ask them what they would like to see on your shelves everyday and be sure to follow their requests.

9

Crucial customer service

Make it the goal of your facility to offer the best possible service to your customers. It is important to train your staff to be the best they can be, while constantly selling and up-selling your products. Provide a script to follow so your staff is consistent with each sale made. This way, there will be a decreased risk of making mistakes. Hand out customer comment cards to get ideas on how you are doing. Food sampling also works as a customer service tool. If you make it easy for your customers to try your food, you will satisfy their cravings and close a sale much faster. Sampling also allows you to offer items you wish to add to your menu, but want to try out first. Provide food sampling stations as soon as your customers walk in the door, at the counter or throughout your facility. You will see it in the customers' eyes if your new item will be a hit or not.

10

Promotions and contests

Promotions and contests are two of the biggest things you could do to get your customers bursting through the door. They help you build rapport with your customers, while providing them with extra value to your facility. Use national holidays for special promotion periods, or make one up of your own. A popular contest item is the business card draw. Keep a fish bowl at your cash register and ask people to drop in their business card for a chance to win a prize. Business card contests are great because they allow you to see who is coming into your facility, while getting the complete contact information to reach customers for future promotions. Hold a bake-off and encourage your customers to join to show off their secret recipes. Whatever your promotion may be, be sure it fits your facility's personality or your customers may get confused about your identity.



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