



Public Health
Law Center

AT WILLIAM MITCHELL COLLEGE OF LAW



HEALTHIER FOOD AND BEVERAGE OUTLETS

Five Steps to Food and Beverage Success

Many Minnesota groups are striving to offer healthier food and beverage options to users of their recreational centers, parks, and other community facilities. This is not an easy adventure given that for several decades, we have trained ourselves to turn off our brains once we enter the doors of facilities of fun. Even though people often go to places like sports complexes and recreational centers to play sports or do other activities we associate with good health (or to watch their kids do these things), ironically, the food and beverages typically offered for sale in these settings are all too often the opposite of healthy.

Booster clubs and concession stand operators often think that they have to sell junk food to make money. The reality is, however, that in many cases, food and beverage operations are not reaching their maximum potential and it is not healthier food that is the problem. There are clear steps that can be taken to improve the efficiency and increase revenues from snack bars or concession stands. With these tips, operators can discover ways to boost both health and profits.



This publication is part of a collection of resources designed to support healthier food and beverage operations. The collection includes the fact sheet *Tips for Better Vending*, and the webinar *Boosting Profits, Boosting Health in Food and Beverage Operations*. These resources and others are available at www.publichealthlawcenter.org.

The Five Steps to Success

This tip sheet is an introductory road map for navigating food and beverage operations and highlights some ways to maximize efficiencies, and to incorporate healthier options. It includes suggestions for those in the planning stages of a new facility as well as for those dealing with established operations. It provides tips specific to seasonal operations (one advantage of seasonal operations is that every May or June is a chance to start fresh!), as well as to year-round operations.

1. Everything starts with the menu. The operation's menu determines the production, service, and managerial responsibilities that must be met. The menu itself should be the result of marketing efforts designed to identify guests' wants and needs. "You can't be everything to everyone" is a cliché, but it certainly applies to the menu. So what can be done to advance menus to the next level in a way that keeps customers interested? Ironically, when products are called "healthy," many customers actually will tend to avoid purchasing

these items because we have been trained to think "health" equals bad taste. But this is no longer true—products that once tasted like cardboard have evolved to a level that fine dining restaurants would be willing to offer them. Salads have become a main course menu item and not just a "side" salad.

The challenge is in how operators brand the menu and manage the numbers associated with items. Instead of promoting an item as "healthy," tell guests about the great taste and freshness. Showing guests how fresh the product is can be a great selling technique. Making salads as they are ordered both lets visitors watch them being made, highlighting their freshness, and keeps them from sitting prepackaged, losing flavor and freshness.

In the past, healthier options also usually meant higher prices. This no longer has to be the case. Growing demand for healthier options has brought pricing to a more reasonable level.

TABLE 1:

For those looking for healthier food, there are a lot more choices. Here is a list of a few quick-food examples that might be offered within recreation centers or parks instead of the traditional, less healthy versions.

Traditional Offerings	Healthier Alternatives
Fried chicken nuggets	Baked chicken nuggets
Potato chips	Baked potato chips, pretzels, grilled corn
Candy bars	Granola and energy bars
Fountain soda and bottled sodas	Waters and organic alternative beverages
Hot dogs	Turkey dogs or soy alternative products
Slushies or similar frozen drinks	Smoothies
Fried chicken sandwiches	Fresh grilled chicken sandwiches
Burritos	Wraps
Pizza	Gluten-free pizza, or pizza with low fat cheese and reduced sodium sauce

2. Pay attention to design and layout. The cornerstones for any decent kitchen design are understanding the ramifications of the menu; the equipment needed to execute the menu effectively; and how the amount of square footage available influences patterns of workflow. People should not be running into each other while trying to do their jobs. Kitchens should be designed to require staff to take as few steps as possible to do their work.

When it comes to kitchens, size is overrated. There have been some 500 square foot gems, well as a few 2,000 square foot turkeys. A detail as small as which way a refrigerator door opens can influence an employee's performance and speed of service. In a day and age of multiple deliveries per week, storage capacity is often miscalculated in the planning phase; cubic footage is as important an issue as square footage. Often, excess storage space translates to the creation of a dumping area for junk or other stuff that no one seems to know what to do with. In other words, the luxury of excess space has the contradictory effect of allowing things to accumulate, including the overstocking of food and drink products.

An operation that will be based on baked products instead of fried products requires different kinds of equipment, and may be less expensive to build.

Small spaces like snack bars or concession stands tend to have an unusually big demand for utilities, including gas, electricity and water. Changing the plumbing or electrical system after the facility is built can be a deal-killer, or end up being delayed for years until remodeling can be done. To avoid this future obstacle, even the most basic of new snack bars should be “overbuilt” from the stand point of utilities, perhaps by as much as one-third. Investment in bigger pipes for water and gas, and a bigger electrical box (to make more amps available) to allow for future equipment needs or additions is a smart investment.

Principles for Financial Success

1. It must taste great. Many healthy options taste good and are in demand, thanks to media and marketing efforts. A focus on providing tasty, healthier products can put you on the path of being profitable.
2. It must be efficient. Operations design and equipment requires attention. Long lines and staff tripping over each other are common problems that can destroy returns.
3. It must be profitable. If the operation is not making money, then it may not be selling the right mix of products in the right way. Re-think the menu.

How do these design principles translate to healthier operations? There are important ways the design can support a menu built on healthier choices in ways that promote economic operations.

For example, an operation that will be based on baked products instead of fried products requires different kinds of equipment, and may be less expensive to build. An operation based on frying products will need an industrial-sized hood, a sprinkler system in case of fire, and certain types of filters. For baking, many places just require a hood that acts as a chimney to release the heat. Also, instead of buying three or four fryers, just one double stacked baking unit may do the job. Ovens can also handle a wide variety of foods—it is amazing how much can be baked in a pizza oven.

There are other ways that menu design also influences equipment and facility designs. Customers like hearing blenders operate. It grabs their attention. So instead of getting a slushie machine, use blenders to make fresh smoothies. Minnesotans' love of the outdoors is well known—so instead of frying a hotdog on a flat top grill, grill outside when possible, and make it fresh chicken on a pineapple circle with a low sodium teriyaki sauce.

Nothing says great food like the fresh smell of food coming off of a grill.

3. Manage the menu to boost the “per cap” rate. The menu structure will also dictate per capita sales, or the “per cap” rate, which is the average amount spent by a visitor. For example, a snack bar menu of sodas, chips, cookies and candy might generate a fifty-cents per cap. Adding hot dogs may boost that number to \$1.00 per cap. Breaking into the \$2.00 per cap strata usually means the addition of sandwiches and/or grilled foods like hamburgers and chicken sandwiches. The newest health push is grilled fish, buffalo burgers, and/or turkey burgers. These types of items can push the per cap to that \$2.00-\$4.00 level. They can also help make a location feel like an interesting, unique experience for visitors. Grilling can occur at any location within a community’s arsenal of facilities, as long as it is properly planned for in the design process.

The menu should hang outside in a spot that is elevated and easy to read from several feet back.

As the average number of visitors increases up to 2,500, the range of choices should also multiply, depending on the anticipated length of stay. Typically we recommend as a starting point offerings like burgers and fries (which can be baked); then the second type of offering to add would be pizza. These types of offerings are great when visitors stay an average of four hours. Good news—there are healthier alternatives for these items. There are great options for those who can grill, and Table 1 above identifies several healthier alternatives for traditional menu items.

4. Efficient operations mean more sales. One of the biggest downfalls for a food and beverage operation is the inability to move a line of customers at more than a glacial pace. Long lines can translate to missed sales and/or cranky guests. It is not hard to anticipate

when long lines are most likely to develop. Parents are always looking for their morning coffees at the start of events at recreation or community centers; or the tournament ends, and eight teams come running to the snack windows. These rushes may be unavoidable, but there are many things that can be done to delay or minimize the crunch.

Stealthy Healthy Booster Tips

There are many ways to support customers’ efforts to eat better without making a big production out of it. “Stealth health” strategies are effective, and can help increase revenues, too.

1. Make healthier choices easy to grab. When using self-service displays, arrange options in a way that supports healthy eating. Put healthy choices like fruit, vegetables, and water in the easiest-to-see and reach spots.
2. Why not make healthy the default? With meals, make the default options for drinks and sides that come with meals the healthier options, such as fruit instead of french fries, water instead of pop. This technique is especially useful for kids’ meals. Visitors can still choose other things, but changing the default options can help busy parents and coaches support healthier eating habits.
3. Small changes can boost health and profits. Reduce the sodium in products and recipes by small amounts. Concessionaires that have tried this typically find they can make small changes that customers don’t even notice. Use some beans or vegetables in meat dishes—this can stretch food dollars and result in a healthier recipe. Reduce portion sizes just a little—use smaller soup bowls or sandwich rolls. Smaller portion sizes help customers eat healthier and can save you money, too.

- Treat the initial snack-seekers or lunch eaters (that early trickle that may start at 11:00 AM or before half-time) as a rush in itself. These lines tend to be short yet impactful for the ill-prepared. Customers will walk away if the service is taking too long. Sweeping aside this first group of people with a sense of urgency can keep the lines from forming for several minutes. There is truth in the observation that everyone hustles when it is busy. The difference between an average food and beverage staff and a great staff is what they do when it is not busy.
- Menu placement is critical. If the menu can't be read until the customer reaches the ordering window, that means trouble. Time is valuable for customers. The same holds true for concessions. Preferably, the menu should hang outside, in a spot that is elevated and easy to read from several feet back, meaning the lettering and prices are formatted for a quick decision. Preview menu boards should also be placed strategically along the line to help guests. Don't allow guests to wait until the last second to decide what to order.

- For smaller operations that rely on the two window setup of “order here” and “pick up here,” it is time to rethink the system. If not there already, drink towers should be relocated between the windows, each having its own register with one staff person responsible for taking orders and another for filling them. Line speed just doubled, if not more.

Five Simple Snacks Kids Love That Are Proven Sellers

1. Low fat cheese and fruit kabobs. Make it fun with fun shapes.
2. Muffins that look like cupcakes.
3. Baked chips.
4. Quesadillas with a twist—low fat cheese and a wheat tortilla. Cut them into fun shapes.
5. Frozen yogurt treats are sweet and fun-looking.

Cookie cutters are not just for cookies!



- When using volunteers, train them on all key points from register to food preparation. The more knowledge and skill they have, the more ability they will have to successfully manage their stations.

5. Stay on top of the numbers. All the time spent in planning a successful kitchen layout or better way to move a line will be for naught unless equal effort is put into managing the food and beverage numbers on a daily and weekly basis. Here is where many municipal operations are working on improving. Just as programming and recreational events are run on a tight schedule with close monitoring, food and beverage operations should be handled the same way. Waiting for the accounting department to produce a monthly P&L is hardly the way to go.

If the numbers are less than satisfactory, it will be difficult to investigate the reasons why or research the problem weeks or a month after the problem occurred.

There are more scientific ways than crossing your fingers in hopes that the numbers will turn out okay. So what can you do?

Weekly inventories are a good start. Then, create a weekly cost-of-goods that should be compared to the theoretical or ideal cost-of-goods, based on sales mix and prices paid for goods coming in the back door (a topic that requires an article in itself). For some, the selling season may be short. Wouldn't it be nice to know after the first week or two whether there are any "leaks" or red flags that things are not going as planned, rather than waiting 6-8 weeks for the first meaningful set of financials? Planning how to track the numbers makes as much sense as spending thousands of dollars on a new kitchen design or equipment.

Conclusion

Food and beverage operations in parks and community centers deserve some micromanaging. Smart design and focused management can change the food and beverage operation's status from the "necessary evil" to a respected, breakaway model for sale and profit potential. And with just a little thought and planning, these operations can not only be more profitable, but also help promote longer lives and better health for customers.

Last updated: November 2013

This publication was commissioned by the Public Health Law Center at William Mitchell College of Law, St. Paul, Minnesota, and was drafted by Profitable Food Facilities. Financial support for this publication was provided by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, the Minnesota Department of Health's Community Transformation Grant initiative, and the Statewide Health Improvement Program.

The Public Health Law Center thanks Katherine Bishop, Nutrition Policy Associate with the Center for Science in the Public Interest, for her review and comments on a draft of this publication.



Profitable Food Facilities, www.profitablefood.com, specializes in captive market food and beverage operations and restaurants, including in large casinos, private country clubs, high end daily fee courses, resorts, ski operations, aquatic centers, theme parks, wellness centers and day spas. PFF focuses on improving the sales, quality, and profitability of food service operations, and has worked with more than 370 facilities in 48 states, Canada, England, and the Middle East.

The Public Health Law Center provides information and legal technical assistance on issues related to public health. The Center does not provide legal representation or advice.