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by Lisa Bertagnoli/BACK OF THE HOUSE

Taking MEASURES



When is a restaurant kitchen like a factory? All the time, at least if you pose that question to executives at T.G.I. Friday's. That's why, four years ago, Friday's executives decided to apply IBM's Six Sigma principles to a nagging back-of-the-house problem: slow ticket times.

Ticket times were running about 16 minutes, stressing the kitchen, servers and guests. "It was almost a joke that we couldn't get food out the window on a busy shift," says Jay Johns, vice president of strategic operations for the Carrollton, Texas-based company.

Johns, who at the time had completed some Six Sigma training at the University of Minnesota, thought it might work to apply those principles, normally used for factories, to Friday's kitchen. Factories and restaurants are not dissimilar: "In other businesses, you have points of sale, points of distribution," Johns explains. "In the restaurant business, it happens under one roof."

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Six Sigma's process is called DMAIC: define, measure, analyze, improve and control. Friday's applied all five steps to the slow ticket-time issue.

"We put processes in place to get the feedback from the field," Johns says. "Everyone agreed we had a bottleneck in the window." In addition to making the guest wait too long for food, the bottleneck meant food would "die" in the window—that is, become unsuitable for serving.

In analyzing the slow ticket times, Friday's made several discoveries and adjustments to the back of the house.

First, Friday's reworked several recipes to make them less complicated for cooks. Plates were also redesigned to be "guest ready" right off the line, not in need of garnishes or other finishing touches.

Photography by John Wong

T.G.I. Friday's employs **FACTORY-LIKE CONTROLS** to cut ticket times and improve service.



SNAPSHOT

Concept T.G.I. Friday's
Ownership Carlson Restaurants Worldwide
Headquarters Carrollton, Texas
Units 907 worldwide, 600 domestic
2007 Systemwide Sales \$3.25 billion*
Average Check \$14.79
Average Unit Volume \$3.6 million

*Chain Leader estimate

T.G.I. Friday's kitchen-management system and zones in the pickup window enable wait staff to quickly find plates and deliver them to tables.

A new kitchen-management system is part of Friday's back-of-the-house controls package. The system keeps track of menu items' cooking time and paces orders accordingly.

BACK OF THE HOUSE

Faster ticket times means Friday's can serve 10 percent more guests during rush periods.

The plating procedure has been reworked to eliminate garnishes and other frills guests deemed unnecessary. Today plates come off the line "guest ready."

Friday's has cut ticket times to nine minutes from 16 by using factory-style controls.

To simplify orders, Friday's unbundled the choice of soup or salad from its entree orders. "All research showed that guests were time-starved... their time was worth as much or more than soup or salad," Johns explains. "We were forcing another course on them when they didn't want it." After the unbundling, only 20 percent of guests now choose a soup or salad with their main course, he says.

Given guests' concerns about portion sizes, that move was astute, says Steve Loftis, a restaurant training consultant based in Grand Haven, Mich. "They were answering the guest need," he says. "My feeling is, get to the future before your guest does... that's what [Friday's] is trying to do."

Overall, Loftis applauds Friday's initiative as "innovative and healthy for the industry."

LABOR ADJUSTMENTS

Friday's also installed new kitchen-management hardware and software, which enables the kitchen to group food in the window according to tables.

This tactic works well, says Anne Biron, who was a general manager at a Friday's in Methuen, Mass., while the new kitchen procedures were in test. The previous kitchen-management system "didn't gauge food properly," says Biron, now a Friday's director of operations in New Hampshire.

One example: A table would order a steak dish



and a pasta dish, and both orders would be sent at the same time. As a result, the pasta was finished and waiting at the window long before the steak was done. The new system knows cooking times for all menu items and paces the orders accordingly.

A new way to "zone" food in the window also helps, Biron says. Each menu item has a designated place in the window, so servers know exactly where to look when their order comes up. "Before, it was wherever there was space in the window," Biron says. "Now, it's 'pull it and run it.'"

FAST AND EFFICIENT

Back-of-the-house staffing is more efficient, too. Eliminating parsley and other garnishes from the plate reduced the need for a garnisher/expediter. Cooks scheduled during busy times, or "weed eaters," are no longer necessary due to the streamlined recipes and plating process; in fact, Friday's was able to cut a position from the cook line.

Friday's began rolling out the improved kitchen system two years ago. Ticket times have been reduced to nine minutes. More efficient staffing and less waste have boosted profitability by 3 points and cut waste by 1 percent.

Because tables turn faster, Friday's restaurants are able to serve 10 percent more guests during peak periods. "We have seen nice guest-count gains over the last couple of years," Johns says.

Future refinements are in the works, including front-of-the-house procedures that Johns declined to discuss. And controls are now in place to make sure that kitchens don't fall back into bad habits.

"We can see [ticket] times for every restaurant, every day, every hour, and by shifts," Johns says. "If anyone starts to backslide, we can work on it." ■

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