

Case Study

Designing an Employee Café from Scratch

One of a series of reports of the results of Clarion Group projects, illustrating ways in which dining services are improved and new opportunities to increase value are created. Names and identifying details have been omitted to protect our client's anonymity.

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It isn't often that a dining facility designer is handed a blank sheet of paper to use for planning a new café. But that was the happy circumstance we were presented by the architect for a new corporate office building.

THE SITUATION: A company had just completed a merger and wanted to consolidate multiple offices at one location. There would be 1,100 employees at the site: executives and administrators, technical, clerical, call center and support personnel. The building would not be within walking distance of stores or restaurants, so a good employee café and convenience store were considered important amenities.

This was a "design-build" project – the architect and builder working in tandem to complete the project quickly at a lower cost than the conventional process. Our part of the work also had to be quick and accurate.

WHAT WE DID: Fortunately, the company had a clear idea of what it wanted and had confidence in the architect and contractor. We, in turn, established a good working relationship with the architect.

Collaboration between our offices was excellent. Since design had just started, we were able to determine the size and shape of the dining center space without being limited by previously-established walls or other obstacles. The building is shaped in a wide "V," with the café located at the center, providing easy access from all work areas.

Angela Phelan, Clarion's vice president was project manager for Clarion. Our long-time collaborator in design projects, Raymond/Raymond Associates of Chester, NY, worked closely with her and handled the technical aspects.

Since the dining service would not be subsidized, the facility had to be both very attractive to the building's employees and very efficient, so the operator could provide a broad menu to a diverse population and excellent service with minimum staff.

THE PLAN: To accomplish this objective, we abandoned the concept of a traditional, expansive kitchen. Instead, Ms Phelan started from the server, determining which station should go where, then backing it up with the prep equipment needed to make it work.

For example, pizzas are prepared at the service counter in customers' view and baked in an oven right at the station. A single chef can cook specialty dishes for three customers at a time at the exhibition cooking station, utilizing countertop induction cookers.

Sandwiches and salad plates at the deli counter, and burgers and other grilled foods at the grill station are prepared in front of the customer, just as he/she requests. There's even a pasta cooker at the counter.

Only hot entrees and soups are prepared entirely in the kitchen at equipment that is directly behind the hot food station.

The system permits the extensive use of fresh ingredients, meaning meals can be healthful as well

as tasty and served exactly to the customer's preference.

The soup and salad bar, desserts and beverages are located on three islands in the center of the servery.

Refrigerated display cases, holding grab-and-go sandwiches, salads, pastries, desserts and canned and bottled cold beverages, are located between the servery entrance and the cashiers' stations. Customers in a hurry can pick up a meal or snack, pay and leave without crossing paths with those at the staffed stations.

Since the staffed stations adjoin, the café can be lightly staffed on days of slow business. On these days, one server can handle two stations.

The convenience store has access from both the dining area and the building's main corridor. The store offers coffee, pastries and snacks, as well as sundries, newspapers and similar items, and remains open until 5:00 p.m. This permits employees who want to take home a meal prepared in the café to pick it up from a refrigerator on their way out of the building at night.

THE OUTCOME: From its opening, the café has been a success, serving 600 to 800 customers a day and has been profitable for the operator.

CLARION'S CONTRIBUTION: We brought the perspective of experienced operators, as well as skilled facility planners, to the project. Ms Phelan and other members of the Clarion team have managed corporate and campus dining services and know how to meet the operator's need for efficiency, as well as the customer's need for convenience and fresh, wholesome foods.

Our associates at Raymond/Raymond are experts in converting concepts into working drawings and detailed specifications and managing the process. Together, we provide clients with innovative and practical facilities.