

## ***Viewpoint***

Welcome to the future

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**W**riting in a different context for the *American Law Journal*, Paul Lippe, CEO of Legal OnRamp, an attorney-focused website, offers some comments worth pondering in the world of on-site dining service.

**“The boom . . . is over,”** Lippe wrote. “But what happens when the boom ends?”

Most non-financial companies, colleges, universities and schools may not be immediately affected, and there may not be a serious recession. But the economic life of the U.S. has changed suddenly and continues to change, and not for the better.

In addition to the reversal in economic fortunes, there are the environmental issues and, for on-site dining service, the increasing consumer awareness of nutrition as a key component of their personal wellness.

**The first order of business,** Lippe says, is get past the denial stage quickly and move to acceptance. “Get back to the basics – delivering value and listening to [customers].” Conducting a customer satisfaction survey is a useful way to listen to your customers, but it won’t provide all the answers you will need to adapt to the new realities.

**Survey responses** offer one-dimensional answers: the majority say they are happy or unhappy with various aspects of the dining center: food, menu selection, speed of service and convenience, for example. To gain an insight into customers’ real preference and behavior, spend time in the café, *watching what they do*, as opposed to what they say. Look at your daily sales reports – what sells and what doesn’t.

**While customer complaints** commonly focus on hot food offerings, your sales records are likely to show that hot meals are a minority – 20% or less – of all lunch transactions and salad sales are among the highest. This doesn’t mean ignore the quality and variety of hot foods, but make sure your salad offerings are really up to snuff.

**The usual response** to slower sales and rising subsidies or falling profits is to cut costs. But you can’t cut costs fast enough or far enough to get under falling sales. The key is to increase sales, or at least keep them from falling further.

I know I’ve preached this sermon before, but when times are tough, what’s the alternative? Sure, boom times will come again, but not for a while. In the meanwhile, control costs, but work more on improving sales.

- Tom Mac Dermott  
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