

Sales Data Will Tell You What Customers Buy

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Third in a series on tools to meet customer expectations, improve sales, services and the bottom line.

If you have reviewed and analyzed the results of a customer satisfaction survey and held several focus group discussions, you have some very useful information about what customers say they want.

Often, there's an emphasis on healthy foods and, inevitably, on the price/value equation. But does what customers say match what they actually do? Often not.

There are two key, not very sophisticated, ways to learn customers' actual behavior: Analyze sales data and observe what's going on in the dining center.

Numbers Can Talk

Today, all cash registers or point-of-sale (POS) systems record sales by product. By looking at the register's detail tape, you can see how many purchases were made in each product category – hot meals at several price points, deli sandwiches, cold drinks, etc. More sophisticated POS systems provide a detailed, printed summary by the day or week.

(Of course, you need to be sure the cashiers are using the system properly. Sometimes cashiers will take the shortcut of ringing up some or most sales on a miscellaneous key. The result tells you nothing.)

A chart showing the aggregate of two weeks' sales will give you a clear picture of what customers are actually buying. By matching the each day's sales to the menu, you will see which hot food or other items are selling better, or worse. For example, how well did a pasta dish sold at \$3.75 on Monday, compare with the fish and meat entrees sold on Tuesday and Wednesday at the same price? You will see both the number of items sold and their dollar value.

While menu selection is primarily the responsibility of the dining service manager, it will be helpful to you, as the person responsible for the dining service and answerable to both senior management and café customers, to know and understand the dynamics of the operation. You can work with your manager to find the right combination of menu items and features that will satisfy your customers.

Salad or Pizza?

It would not be surprising to find that customers' stated preferences don't match actual buying patterns – and you may find some surprises. For example, Clarion sales reviews have found that the theoretically popular pizza and burgers are far down on the list of purchases by adults in the work-place. The salad bar sometimes is the highest grossing category on the menu and conventional hot food doesn't generate enough revenue to justify the cost of the labor it takes to prepare it.

By comparing what customers say they want with what they are actually buying, you will be able to reshape menus, services and systems to increase customers' level of satisfaction and perception of value.

The next article in this series will discuss what to look for when observing the action in the café.

Clarion will analyze your sales, menu, services and operation and plan improvements to increase customer satisfaction and sales. Call Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011 or Angela Phelan, 973/544-6223, or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com