

Viewpoint

The client's job: Ensure **Fresh & Natural** meals in the company or campus dining center

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Enabling our clients to offer students and employees the opportunity to eat well every day is the best way to demonstrate management's respect and belief in their value. That's the core of our mission.

The second – and equally important – element of Clarion's **Fresh & Natural** concept is the attitude the operator brings to the table as his staff provides food that is locally sourced and freshly made from ingredients free of hormones, chemicals and unhealthy fats.

Maintaining this concept is not easy, but once grasped, no one wants to go back. Certainly not the customers who will pay more for meals that won't add unhealthy substances to their diet; not the operator who sees an uptick in sales for **Fresh & Natural** menu items, or the client who hears praise from employees for giving them the option to actively take charge of their health while at work.

Overcoming Obstacles

Diners recognize the freshness of the lettuce on their sandwiches, the lively color of the fresh string beans, the entrees made on the spot, right in front of them, from a collection of fresh ingredients they can see. They respond by choosing these fresh foods.

There's no doubt that farm-to-dining service is a path strewn with roadblocks: wholesale prices; local farmers whose crops fail, and the exacting process of purchasing organic products at higher prices than conventional.

Careful, thoughtful purchasing has, and will continue to, put more pressure on the large suppliers to begin to buy from more small farms and to find their own ways to lower their prices. The die is cast.

But magical thinking won't get it done.

Contrary to what many clients believe, it's not the job of the food service company to decide on its own to provide a **Fresh & Natural** menu plan. Left to their own devices, they might offer a few items that bow to the new healthy eating trends.

Fresh Becomes the Norm

To be fair, some very successful food service providers go to great lengths to offer freshly prepared, and sometimes locally sourced, products.

But to *ensure* that excellent, **Fresh & Natural** food is on the menu every day for every meal part, it's the client's job to take the lead and mandate the program.

If everyone agrees on this concept, providing the freshest, liveliest, most interesting food, becomes the norm.

The attitude of pride and pleasure in preparing really excellent food is what drives food people into the business. Being given the tools and the mandate to do the best – to be the best – changes everything.

That change in attitude can be palpable when everyone gets on board; when a new idea catches fire.

Learning the skills, taking them to the line and being complimented by customers is a wonderful feeling. This expansion of individuals' talents is tremendously valuable in creating a staff that continually wants to learn more, become more productive and who knows they are performing a genuine service. We might say that *building aptitude builds the best attitude!*

Talk to Your Chef

We counsel and encourage our clients to go into the kitchens of their dining facilities, to talk to the managers, chefs and food preparers, to ask questions and to become familiar with the daily

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activities of the team working there.

That's where the operator's thread begins. Knowing what the problems are: A cold snap suddenly driving up the cost of a case of lettuce is just as meaningful to the food industry as a sudden downturn in the Dow is to the financial community.

Knowing the client understands that a 20 percent increase in the price of a case of fresh, organic lettuce cannot be passed on to the customer is a big help to the operator.

The manager may not think he has the time to explain, but those ten minute coffee breaks with the client gives both a chance to explore issues and come up with solutions.

Communication

The manager needs to cut costs. Perhaps he makes a good and tasty substitution and waits out the freeze. Maybe the answer is shredded slaw for the sandwiches – a change in expectation that the client can help alleviate. Encourage the operator to communicate with

you *and* the customers.

For example: "It's bitterly cold in California and much of the lettuce crop has been destroyed. Rather than offer you a couple of poor, shriveled, very expensive lettuce leaves, we're adding cabbage slaw to our sandwich offerings . We hope you'll try it on your sandwiches this week. Cabbage is healthy and abundant right now, so come taste a sample and give it a whirl. We'll have your favorite romaine back just as soon as it's up to par. Bon appetit!"

Share your thoughts with the customers, let them in on the "mystery" of food service and ask for their cooperation. They will give it gladly because the **Fresh & Natural** attitude is contagious and it's a powerful way to build consensus and good health

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