

THE INFLUENCE OF “CLEAN” IN FOOD SERVICE OPERATIONS



One of the most challenging fundamentals hospitality operators face in maintaining their daily operations is Front of House (FOH) cleanliness. Cleanliness standards in a food service establishment are extremely tough to sustain for any operator, but the significance of looking clean or failure to have strict clean procedures can deny a business their success if not part of an enforced daily regimen. However, clean does not mean sanitary, and while being clean is very important for a business to keep their customers happy and returning, you need sanitary to keep customers safe. In this blog I am only going to address the influence “clean” has on FOH food service operations and how important this is.

There are many concerns with cleanliness in food service and you hear about this all the time. Some operators ignore the need to maintain a clean FOH establishment, and some just have trouble keeping up. Fortunately the vast majority of hospitality businesses are maintaining a clean environment. However, there is commonly a direct correlation between lack of cleanliness and how well the business is keeping you safe. This becomes more suspect when poor FOH cleanliness is encountered regularly. If this is the case you have to begin to wonder if you should be eating in a business under these conditions. The relationship between a dirty establishment and risk falls into the category of Health Department Regulations along with a safe food handling program being maintained. Being dirty does not necessarily mean there are safety violations, however if the business is always dirty the possibility of unsafe food handling and other violations may also be occurring. The contrary can be true for a visually clean business; however I do encounter clean FOH businesses with poor sanitation procedures. Keep in mind that clean as an observation does not mean sanitary, however this is a separate topic altogether.

My background is forty years with restaurants, catering and private club operations, with twenty five years as a General Manager. My accomplishments include achieving the Certified Club Manager (CCM) and Certified Executive Chef (CEC) designation. Today I manage my own consulting business and one of my passions is providing operators the help they need on having a cleaner business. Many of us in the industry with similar concerns collaborate to assist operators with solutions to improve their clean standards. Fortunately, there is a trend of interest from consumers and professionals alike, as the focus for a safe food service experience has become forefront news. Consumers are more reactive than ever before when encountering and alerting others about a dirty food service business and this is very supportive in our mission. The truth is most operators are doing their best to maintain a risk free environment and this is mainly due to managers and chefs that really care about their customers.

Aside from the substantial amount of processes to maintain a successful business, management must place themselves in the position of the customer. Without an objective view from the customer’s viewpoint management’s understanding of reality can be hindered. **Upon entering a business, a customer’s visual interpretation becomes reactive to the overall dining experience**

and can directly affect their return decisions. How a customer reacts to service or the quality of food may begin with the visually clean conditions of the business. Therefore, if your business is not visually clean the customer experience can begin with a negative approach to the dining experience. Having a clean business is fundamental in the marketing plan if you want customers to remain and eat or to support return business. Part of this plan may include a noticeably clean and well maintained parking lot and entrance, very clean floors or carpeting, tables that have been properly cleaned and prepared for the next service, very clean silverware on tables, maintaining clean menus, clean hands, fingernails and attire on staff, and a very clean washroom, however this is only a short list of what needs to be maintained with each customer encounter every single day. If the business is clean and free of risk it can be expected to prosper as long as the food and service programs are equally supportive. A few difficulties with keeping clean are; some businesses fall short because they get too busy, some do not see the difference, while others do not understand or care about the reality of their actions or inactions. I often consult on this as a reason for failure to business owners. Certainly having an attentive first encounter, great service, and good food are in the mix, but no one likes to eat in a dirty establishment. I am in constant disbelief at how many businesses continue to operate in an unclean fashion and place the blame of reduced business upon staff or the external elements. The fact is; managing a business under poor clean conditions for any length of time will result in customer loss and without a continuous influx of new unsuspecting customers to support this erosion there is only one outcome on the horizon.

I believe any food service owner that does not commit to the processes necessary in protecting their customers with a clean and risk free obligation philosophy does not deserve to be operating a food service business. While I mean this, I also support improving the failure percentages that are widespread in this industry. This is why I consult and why I associate myself with other organizations that are committed to this change. On social media there are a significant number of individuals and organizations interconnecting to deliver the message of cleanliness to food service businesses, and the operators that want or need help can ask and receive assistance. We all want safe and risk free conditions when eating food, and to know that there are so many people on board with this effort is very comforting. As a customer, if you enter a restaurant and think they should be cleaner, say something next time. Let the owner know that it is unacceptable not to be clean. If a food service business will not listen to you, there are many of us that will.

The author Jim Lopolito is a leader in hospitality consulting and event management in the NY and US Northeast Region and often writes on hospitality topics. Along with on premise consulting there is also an option for phone consulting services to anyone, anywhere. Jim is a member of the Dining Grades Group, which supports the progression of hospitality cleanliness.

To reach Jim Lopolito Hospitality Productions: www.askjimlopolito.com

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