



Russell Bellanca, owner of Alfredo of Rome, encourages his managers to observe the dining room from the vantage point of various seats. "This can never be done enough," he says. "You have to know what your guest is seeing and experiencing."

Do You See What I See?

A cobweb, sticky salt shaker or an annoying sound system can detract from all of your restaurant's hard work.

SITTING IN A DENTIST'S CHAIR FOR 40 MINUTES RECENTLY proved more painful than I had expected. Not because of the work being done – I was fully prepared for the discomfort associated with having a filling, and the local anesthesia was working just fine.

No, it was the glare of the fluorescent lights directly above me, which was made all the more discomforting by the numerous dead bugs trapped in the light casing. Having such a scene in my direct line of sight for nearly an hour put a totally negative spin on what would have been as fine an experience at the dentist as one might realistically expect.

When the procedure was over, I shared this observa-

tion with my dentist. He looked up and was aghast. Apologizing profusely, he uttered, "I've never put myself in that chair!"

How many foodservice operators and restaurateurs are guilty of the same thing? My very educated guess is most of them. In today's fast-paced, high-pressure environment, most operators are too busy to put themselves in the diner's chair and view the operation from the vantage point of the customer.

Taking the time to do so will likely yield important information about what your patrons really see, hear and smell, and how those observations influence their perception of your operation.

Let's face it: An operator can go to great lengths to create the perfect tabletop setting, beautiful food presentations and impeccably trained and turned out staff, but if the diner catches sight of a greasy cobweb hanging from the ceiling fan, the experience is greatly diminished.

Here's the challenge: Commission every staff member, from kitchen workers to servers to managers, to sit in 10 chairs throughout the restaurant and write down what they observe. The notations will undoubtedly surprise you. Here's just a sampling of the feedback you might receive:

- Dirty bus boxes in close proximity to dining tables
- Fluorescent light streaming out when kitchen doors swing open, drawing attention to the back of the house and interrupting the ambiance of the dining room
- Dirty air conditioning/heating ducts
- Dusty blinds and window dressings
- Streaked windows
- Sticky salt and pepper shakers
- Goopy ketchup bottles
- Sticky menus
- Wobbly or unbalanced tables
- Unstable or uncomfortable chairs
- Plant leaves covered in dust and linked by cobwebs
- Torn and stained counter-top daily special menus
- Scratched or stained glass on art work
- Tears and stains on tablecloths or napkins
- Ceiling tiles stained from old leaks

That's just scratching the proverbial surface. Dirty light fixtures, burnt-out bulbs or lights glaring directly at the diner might only be seen from the table. Sound system speakers that are scratchy or blare at the diner can certainly take away from the effect hoped for by installing the system in the first place. Drafts from the air conditioning vents or heaters blowing directly on the patrons can make them less than comfortable.

The other area of the restaurant to inspect through the eyes of the patron is the rest room. Move through it as a guest would, seeing it as if for the first time. Are the floors clean – even the corners? Is there debris in the floor drain? Do you see soap and water splash marks on the mirror or corrosion on the sink drain?

Do the doors to the stalls close and lock properly? Are the paper dispensers full, clean and operating smoothly? Is any signage or artwork clean and neatly hung? Many consumers gauge the overall cleanliness of the restaurant, including the kitchen, by the state of your bathrooms.

Conducting these types of surveys in even the best-run restaurants may yield unfavorable observations. This is certainly no indictment of today's operators – most foodservice professionals take great pride in the cleanliness of their facilities. However, human nature being what it is, we often simply don't see these things. A pile of take-out boxes or paper goods, shoved into a corner next to the bus station during a busy rush last week, quickly becomes part of the scenery. We're moving so fast that we don't see the film on the top of the

hanging lamps over the booth tables. Who knows the seats of two of the chairs at table 21 were sunken? Your guests do.

'GET TO IT FIRST'

"I was meeting with a manager at a table once and had to stop the conversation because I was distracted by dust on the glass of the light overhead," says Russell Bellanca, owner of Alfredo of Rome, with locations in Manhattan and Orlando, Fla. "The guest sits there and sees that. The manager and staff have to get to it first.

"The longer you're in this business, the more jaded you become and the less you notice these things."

To combat that blindness, Bellanca dines in his own restaurants and other eateries regularly, constantly making mental notes of the total guest experience. Not only does he put himself in the guest's place, he also encourages managers to sit in various seats throughout the dining room and observe the room, the fixtures and the details as the guest would.

"This can never be done enough," Bellanca says. "You have to know what your guest is seeing and experiencing."

The personal hygiene of the staff is another factor operators must stop and scrutinize from time to time. Chipped nail polish, or unusual body piercings and outlandishly tinted hair do say something to the diner about your operation and the experience you are delivering. Look at your staff members from the patron's point of view and consider whether their appearance is in keeping with the experience you are working so hard to deliver.

Operators today strive to perfect their presentation, but often forget the advice of minimalist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: God is in the details. Your customers remember details – the good, the bad and the ugly. Whether contrived by you or unwittingly allowed to exist, those details color their experience and their perception of your operation. Such things detract from the crispness of the concept and diminish the impression made on the guest.

Walt Disney posted a sign behind his desk that read, "No chipped paint!" Disney's thinking was that if visitors to his theme park were to sit on a bench with chipped paint, that flaw would detract from their overall enjoyment of the perfect storybook environment he had worked so hard to create. That simple phrase may be the true source of the Disney parks' success, as all other theme parks are held up to the Disney standard of cleanliness and attention to detail.

In today's ultra-competitive environment, foodservice operators in all segments should take it to heart that God is indeed in the details – and guests are looking at all the details – and chipped paint can make just as much impact as a perfectly prepared and presented entrée. 🍷

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