



How to Get Out of the Weeds

By Howard Riell

The trick isn't keeping your restaurant from occasionally veering off into the weeds, because you won't be able to do it. The trick is getting back out of them again, during service.

"Every meal is a perfect storm waiting to happen," says veteran restaurant consultant and operator Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City. "Ice machines break down, the chef is off his game, deliveries come late, unexpected volume of guests, POS glitches, equipment failures and inexperienced or un-engaged managers all contribute to crisis."

The most common cause of service failure, Spiegel says, is the lack of leadership and an unclear understanding of the difference between hospitality and service. Other candidates include poor infrastructure and systems and lack of training. "A bad mealtime experience is a great learning tool," Spiegel says. "Broken processes need to be mapped and redesigned."

Spiegel lists four all-too-common causes of operational problems during meal service, all of which are preventable:

1. Failure to have premeal meetings to set the mood, assign tables and staff, share reservations and bookings with staff and go over menu changes and specials.
2. Failure of managers to communicate with kitchen staff to identify staffing- or food-preparation issues.
3. Failure to conduct line checks to ensure product is stocked and ready to prepare.
4. The manager not being on the floor to anticipate and solve problems.

"Every now and then even a well-run restaurant runs into unexpected challenges," Spiegel says. "It's time to reset. Even a three-minute huddle with the staff can get them back on track." The most important outcome of a crisis, she says, is that the guests see that it is handled well even if meals have to be comped.

“...Cross-training is almost always critical. The sous-chef should be perfectly capable of handling the slot (Chef) as long as everyone else can move up a notch to cover...”

– Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, President of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, New York, NY