

catering *to Opportunity*

by | *Wayne Toczek*

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Some of the content for this article came from *The Food Service Managers' Tune-Up Book*, by Tim Bauman, CDM, CFPP and Wayne Toczek. To order, send an email to tuneup@earthlink.net.

Looking for a way to break up the repetition of three meals a day: cook it up, dish it up, clean it up? Seeking an opportunity to showcase the talents of your staff? Wondering how your department can be the darling of your marketing/admissions department? If you have a meeting room that can accommodate a dozen or more and some creative thinking, developing an external catering program may just be the way to put your department and your facility in a positive spotlight. Here are some steps to follow when determining if a catering program is right for you.

Plan ahead to the last detail, deliver excellent product and presentation on time, follow-up with your customer, and tout your success and contribution to your direct report. Catering can be an exciting—and profitable—addition to your foodservice program.

STEP 1

Explore the feasibility

- Evaluate your in-house talent. Do you and your staff have the skills needed to deliver food and service that will enhance the reputation of your facility?
- Inventory your equipment and display ware. Will you need to purchase large or small equipment to provide your service? If yes, how much will you need to invest to get started?
- How can your prime vendor support your program?
- Identify your target customers—consider the size of your room, what your customer can bring to your organization—think, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, Kiwanis, or other civic organizations in your community.
- Discuss the possibilities with your direct report. What benefits will your program bring to the facility? How will revenue be adjusted against spending on your budget?

STEP 2

Develop the framework for your catering program

- Start with a menu and items list. What services require 24 hours notice? 48 hours notice? A week or more?
- Develop a pricing structure for your services. Include cost of food, supplies, labor (including taxes and benefits—usually 25-35 percent), rental equipment, and room rental fee (if desired by your facility). Round up—for example, if you are serving chicken breasts packed 24/case to 20 guests, charge for the entire case. Also include the cost of condiments in the price of menu items.
- Determine what equipment you will buy and charge back to events over time. Also decide what equipment you will rent and charge directly to the event.
- Determine a “shop supplies” charge, just as your mechanic does. This would include the cost of items that are not easily identifiable to the customer, but are very real costs for every event—chemicals used in clean up, pan liners used in production, spices, foil, film, etc. Translate this information to a percentage of event costs—perhaps 5 percent, 7 percent, or 10 percent—and use for every event.
- Set up the procedure for coordinating event ordering for room and food. Will you use the computer or a paper form? Whose approval is required to book an event? How



will billing be handled—and will you require advance payment for any services? Who will book the room?

- Set up specific procedures and a form providing all information.
- Be sure to include a cancellation policy.

STEP 3

Get the word out

- Consider speaking at a Chamber of Commerce meeting or sending an e-mail to members.
- Add sample menus to your facility’s website as a PDF or Word document that can be downloaded.
- Draft a confirmation letter.
- Take photos of your events for future marketing or post positive comments.
- Invite the local paper, post flyers on bulletin boards, contact leaders of your target customer groups.
- Offer an incentive for customer referral... a tray of cookies, perhaps.

STEP 4

Make it worthwhile

- Keep good records. Make sure your events are profitable or at least recovering all costs if that is the philosophy of your facility.
- Review and update your pricing annually.
- Solicit feedback. Follow-up with customers and use comments to improve your program.
- Know your limits. Assess the talent of your staff and be realistic about the number and frequency of events that you can deliver with excellence. It takes a long time to recover from a poor performance.



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Tips to Add Pizzazz to Your Catering Events Without Breaking Your Budget

Here are two dozen tips from *The Food Service Managers' Tune-up Book*, by Tim Bauman and Wayne Toczek, that will help you add “pop” to your events.

1. Search secondhand shops for trays and platters. They don't have to match, but they must be made of material that can be sanitized.
2. Look for swatches of cloth in all sorts of colors. Fabrics are great to “crumble up” on the table and cover layers of your table.
3. Use a variety of boxes to create different levels. Height adds interest and excitement to the table.
4. Ceramic tile and marble slabs are great to use and available at any home improvement store.
5. Need a nice carving board? Look for a round wooden table top that is brand new, available at most home improvement stores. (Typically they are in the craft area where they sell table legs and do-it-yourself shelving.)
6. Purchase a portable NSF-approved burner and a non-stick pan for a quick action station (keep a fire extinguisher nearby).
7. Landscaping blocks make nice tray stands and add levels. Purchase them new and then run them through the dish machine to make sure they are clean.
8. Christmas lights are great to use to decorate a table. Position the cord so your customers do not trip.
9. Glass blocks make nice table décor and can be found at home improvement stores.
10. Wire chafing dishes can be dressed up by draping with colored material. Avoid placement by the stereo area.
11. Baskets make great utensil holders. Purchase at local craft or home décor stores and line with cloth napkins.
12. Use a round angel food cake pan filled with ice and sliced oranges and lemons to create a fancy ice ring for any punch.
13. Take dipping chocolate to a new level. Use wooden skewers as the dipping utensil for items such as marshmallows, rice crispy treats, strawberries, pineapple chunks, bananas, and other fruit.
14. Red cabbage leaves make a nice underliner for fruit displays. Purchase a couple of garnishing books for other great ideas.
15. Think of customer flow when setting up a table to ensure a smooth traffic pattern. Consider the scatter system, using stations to keep the crowd moving.
16. Use small fancy picture frames to hold cards which identify foods. Make sure the penmanship is good or print from the computer.
17. Use circulating fans for outside functions to blow on certain displays. The light breeze keeps flying pests away.
18. Glass mirror tiles make great trays for food items and as level tops for different sections. Manage the smears to keep them sparkling.
19. Look for décor that matches your function. For example, if you are catering an Asian event, consider using a wok display and even a bamboo bind to cover a table instead of a tablecloth.
20. Make up space when using ice with larger ice chunks. They last longer and compensate for melt off water and dripping.
21. Think about where utensils will be set when not used. Four-inch decorative tiles make both functional and attractive spoonrests.
22. Make functional centerpieces, such as bread rings that are simply done in a bunt pan. Place a nice champagne glass in the center.
23. Think about the uniform. Always have some nice chef coats and black aprons ready for staff use.
24. Make desserts smaller and place a variety on the plate. This will allow for a sample of each and there will be something to please everyone. **DM**

BONUS TIP

Action stations with a person creating can be exciting for the customer and may not require any additional cost. Action stations might include: stir fry, quesadillas or fajitas, sandwich samples, grilling—indoors or out, tossing salads, making wraps, carving meat, or creating Bananas Foster. The list is limited only by your imagination.