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Recreational Food Service: A Growing Employment Option

Abstract

The recreational food service industry represents a wealth of potential job opportunities for graduates of hospitality management degree programs. Most hospitality management curricula are saturated with core courses and basic hospitality education course work, leaving little room for additional components. Recreational food service, however, could be easily integrated into an existing program and made available for students interested in this growing employment option. The author presents one option as a model curriculum approach.

Keywords

Susan Hubbard, Food and Beverage

Recreational food service: A growing employment option

by Susan S. Hubbard

The recreational food service industry represents a wealth of potential job opportunities for graduates of hospitality management degree programs. Most hospitality management curricula are saturated with core courses and basic hospitality educational course work, leaving little room for additional components. Recreational food service, however, could be easily integrated into an existing program and made available for students interested in this growing employment option. The author presents one option as a model curriculum approach.

According to the National Association of Concessionaires (NAC), recreational and leisure food service grosses \$9.5 billion annually and serves three billion consumers.¹ The recreational food service industry, therefore, represents a wealth of potential job opportunities for graduates of hospitality management degree programs.

Recreational food service by definition "is the direct result of the leisure market and its components."² It may also be referred to in the literature as "recfoods." According to Warner, "Leisure time creates the need for recreation. Recreation creates the need for food service as part of the concept of recreation."³ Therefore, recfoods has its own unique place in the world of food service.

"Students educated in hospitality management programs have enjoyed one of the highest employment rates among college graduates. Traditionally, graduates from hospitality programs found themselves gravitating toward careers in hotel and food service operations, of course, where most of the jobs were located."⁴ However, recreational food service employment opportunities are abundant with theaters, arenas, parks/recreation departments, amusement parks, convention centers, pari-mutual facilities, zoos, and family entertainment centers.

According to David Tomber, a National Association of Concessionaires officer, "As part of the hospitality industry, we have an obligation to treat our customers as guests. We know from experience that our performance is enhanced by doing so."⁵ The guest concept is shared by all

facets of the hospitality industry; serving guests is a high mission. Furthermore, "Recreational food service/concessions guests are typically people at play. No matter what the venue, they have decided to expend some of their discretionary income on entertainment or recreation."⁶ Additionally, Charles A. Winans, executive director of NAC, states that "concessions are a vital part of the recreational and leisure-time facilities we frequent with our friends and family. A perfect hot dog at the baseball game, creamy ice cream on a hot day at the zoo, and freshly popped popcorn at the movie theater are all part of our entertainment experience."⁷ For this reason, food service and recreation are forever joined.

Recfoods represent employment option

Most hospitality management curricula are saturated with core courses and basic hospitality educational course work. However, recreational food service could be easily integrated into an existing program and made available for students interested in this growing employment option. Very few programs in the United States offer a course in this area. According to the its Member Recruitment Program, the NAC is working with Florida International University and other universities to make recreational food service a part of the curriculum at colleges and universities nationwide.⁸ At Auburn University, the NAC has endorsed the development of a recreational food service course in the Hotel and Restaurant Management Program and encourages its placement in other college/university curriculum. The NAC is interested in seeing the course added to other hospitality programs because it highlights their profession. Education within the concessions industry, as well as outside it, is a vital part of NAC's mission and the association is constantly working to bring this course into more college and university settings.⁹ The NAC serves the recreational and leisure time food and beverage industry as a network and resource for operators, suppliers, manufacturers, and distributors.¹⁰ Additionally, the membership is "more than 1,000 strong and is comprised of the owners and operators of movie theaters, stadiums, zoos, colleges and universities, park and recreation departments, amusement parks, arenas, skating rinks, and everywhere else offering leisure time food service. Our members are also the companies that provide products and services to these facilities: the suppliers, equipment manufacturers, popcorn processors, brokers, consultants, ad jobber distributors."¹¹

As educators in hospitality programs examine ways to incorporate recreational food service into existing curricula, one option is presented as a model curriculum approach. Most hospitality management courses address the hotel and restaurant fields, as most graduates accept positions in these areas. However, there is a growing opportunity relating to recreational and leisure food service. Therefore, in order to better serve hospitality management students, and thereby better prepare

them for employment opportunities, a course in recreational food service could and should be included in existing programs of study.

Recreational food service should be in curricula

A recreational food service course introduces students to the methods and systems of managing food service operations in facilities such as stadiums, coliseums, arenas, convention centers, amusement parks, and other recreational areas. Recreational food service includes a wide array of food outlets, from fast food and beverage concessions to white linen service. The course in recreational food service covers topics such as operating budgets, cost control, segments of the industry, concession stand management, catering management, vending management, sanitation and food safety, risk management, service standards, and employee training.

The objective in proposing a recreational food service course to be included in the hospitality management program curriculum is to introduce undergraduate and graduate students to the field of recreational food service as a career opportunity and to create an understanding of the impact this area has on tourism and the hospitality industry. Currently, recreational food service represents one of the smaller segments of the total industry, but "this segment offers excellent growth potential for the future as the interest in recreation and leisure activities continues to rise. Recreation and leisure food service offers many career opportunities for persons who are creative and flexible, like excitement, and are stimulated by a demanding work schedule".¹²

This area represents an established and growing segment of the hospitality industry. A partial overview of the food services of the Ballpark at Arlington, home of the Texas Rangers, includes, "52 concessions stands (with nine different concepts); 60 portable food stands; Club Level seating with wait service and air-conditioned grilles; and 120 suites with available made-to order meals. Let's not forget the Diamond Club, plus a few other restaurants, including a Fridays Front Row Sports Grill".¹³ Opportunities in the field are positive and the future bright.

Course is integrated as special topic

According to the proposed option, students have a two-fold opportunity to take the recreational food service course. The course can be integrated into the curriculum as a required "Special Topics in Hospitality" course for three credit hours. Students could select from several options such as Conference Coordination, Special Events, Catering, Resort Management, or Recreational Food Service. If not selected to satisfy the special topics requirement, students may also register for the course to count toward fulfillment of professional elective or free elective requirements. Therefore, students interested in

Recreational Food Service as well as other courses have more than one chance to enroll in the course for credit.

In the Auburn University Hotel and Restaurant Management curriculum, the course is made available as a 500-level class: Special Topics in Hospitality/Recreational Food Service Management for three credit hours (quarter system). According to the Auburn University Bulletin, "courses numbered 501-599 are for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, and for fifth year students in professional curricula. Junior standing is required for enrollment at this level."¹⁴ Therefore, the class content and academic requirements would be the same for all students in the course. Undergraduates working toward a bachelor's degree in hospitality management as well as graduate students working toward a master's degree would have the opportunity to register for the course because of its level.

In a time of declining college enrollments, educators must remember that students consider the total amount of credit hours required in a curriculum when selecting a major. Therefore, institutions must be creative in offering exposure to a variety of employment options and providing an increasingly valuable and competitive knowledge base while keeping in mind the constraints of degree requirements.

References

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⁵D. Tomber, "Education is key," *Boxoffice* 132, no. 6 (June 1996): 34-35.

⁶Ibid.

⁷C. A. Winans, "In good company," *Boxoffice* 132, no. 6 (June 1996): 36.

⁸National Association of Concessionaires.

⁹"Auburn University adds NAC course to curriculum," *The Concessionaire* (August 1996): 1-5.

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¹¹Ibid.

¹²A. C. McCool, F. A. Smith, and D. L. Tucker, *Dimensions of Noncommercial Foodservice Management* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994).

¹³"The Ballpark at Arlington," *The Consultant* (Summer 1995): 30-38.

¹⁴*Auburn University 1996-97 Bulletin* (Auburn, Ala.: Auburn University, 1996).

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