

Food & Beverage: New Restaurant Openings: One Man's Viewpoint - By Greg Witmer, Director of Training, 99 Restaurants  
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Opening a new restaurant is always a challenge for everyone involved. One can think of openings as an organizational test that involves site selection, building, legal issues, the HR department, marketing, operations and trainers. Does your organization have an overall philosophy around opening?

Determining how your organization views opening will help you determine how to plan your training schedule. What is your organizational philosophy? How much rope do you have?

When I start a training program for a restaurant opening, there are a number of factors I take into consideration all the way from pre-opening to evaluation of the training afterwards. I will share with you the steps I follow for a successful opening.

**Construction-Your Best Friend:** One of the practices I have had the most success with is to get acquainted with the construction crew and make sure you are both speaking the same 'language.' Find out if you have a company construction supervisor, or if the construction is handled by an outside firm. Does your construction department know what you need to conduct an effective training program?

You need to know their timelines and the construction sequence of events. Remember, if they are in your way, you are in their way, too. If they say, 'The build-out will take 18 weeks,' you need to find out exactly what it means, whether you'll be able to start training, or if there is two weeks to go after the 18 weeks before move-in can happen. Make the construction department a real ally so that the building is ready when you want to actually start the training.

**If You Have a Training Program...** If you have a training program in place, you need to examine your standard hourly training program to see if it fits the new restaurant. Your standard program most likely contains time frames for menus, POS and steps of service study. The time allotted for 'standard' training should be comparable to your opening plan-give yourself enough time to adequately train your crew. One-on-one training topics can generally be covered in a small group format and the traditional 'follow' steps can be simulated via a role play scenario. You shouldn't have to dramatically alter your basic training design just because it's an opening. Remember, it's only an opening to you, not necessarily to your guests. The skills your staff needs are the same on day 1 as they are on day 100.

**Trainer Selection and Training:** Who trains at the unit level in your organization? Where do your trainers come from? Do you advertise internally or recruit trainers? Is training a pre-requisite to becoming a manager? What is the image and appearance that your trainers project? Remember, what makes a good restaurant trainer doesn't always equate to a good new store opening trainer.

I get a list of potential trainers from the managers, but before I make them trainers, they attend a multi-day 'Train-the Trainer'. The training is not focused on operational skills. Training is very experiential. It's a competitive atmosphere. Look for trainers who have leadership skills and the ability to work on a team. Your assessment should extend beyond classroom activities.

I take the group out to dinner and observe their appearance and how they conduct themselves. It's important to know who is representing you. Be sure you institute some kind of weaning process.

**Benefits of Small Group Method:** Small groups are ideal for openings-no more than eight to ten people. Think small groups when it comes to scheduling training and writing training programs. What I like to do is schedule a day training session and a night training session. This has a dual purpose of accommodating new employees who may be students or have another job. My hidden agenda is that I know I'll have smaller groups by splitting the restaurant group in half.

With small groups, trainers have a smaller ratio of trainer to student. It's easier to give feedback to managers since it's easier to observe individual behavior. It's harder to hide unacceptable behavior and easier to spot those who aren't paying attention or making a lot of mistakes. Small group training also helps develop trainers.

**High School vs. Elementary School:** There are two 'schools' of thought for training groups for openings. One uses the high school approach where there are a number of teachers for different topics, the other is the elementary school approach where there is one teacher for many subjects.

I advocate the elementary principle. It has the advantage of allowing the trainer to get a much better feel for the people in their group. The trainer can then provide the management team with information on how well each individual is performing. You have a better chance of 'weeding out' a bad hire. One teacher who spends a lot of time with people can give better feedback. And, it provides more development for the individual trainer who has to be more engaged because they are required to complete an evaluation of each individual.

**Practice Like You Play:** One of my role models is Bill Walsh, former coach of the San Francisco 49ers. His philosophy was practice like you play. He was a strong advocate of designing training to replicate real life situations. He always said to concentrate on a lot of repetitions of the things that you are going to do a lot of. In restaurant openings, that translates to not overstaffing, repeating normal situations and practicing both good and bad scenarios.

Some of Bill Walsh's quotes include:

'Being prepared starts with identifying the essential skills our team needs to compete effectively.'

'I believe in extremely precise, minute-by-minute tightly structured practices.'

'(Make a) distinction in drills...Between those skills and techniques that can be taught individually and those that require groups.'

I create spread sheets for an opening training schedule with all positions represented, every hour of the day, what food is to be served each day, beverages and all tasks that need to be done. It is very comprehensive.

**Dress Rehearsals:** It all starts with staffing. We schedule our dress rehearsal as if it were a normal night of work. If the normal cooking line has 6 people, we don't practice with 10, we practice with 6. If you do practice with more people than normal, you can inadvertently teach them to be unproductive.

During dress rehearsals, you will always have to consider your marketing department's requests for events like 'pass-arounds' or catered events. But it is better if you do practice as you play as much as possible, to try to make it as realistic as possible. Have people order off the regular menu. Argue for a dress rehearsal that is as close to the real restaurant experience as possible. Again, you need to know the organizational philosophy.

**Who's In Command Here?** In an opening scenario, you need to know who is the decision maker on the floor, decide what authority trainers have, and what gets deferred to managers. It is important that even before you get started that everyone is on the same page. Have clear definitions of authority and responsibility. Separate what the trainers can correct i.e. skills, versus what the managers need to correct, i.e. behaviors.

**Role of the Management Team:** During the training period, the managers should not be integral to the training program. Let them know that they should rotate and pay attention, but shy away from giving them significant training roles during the week of training. Manager's tend to get pulled away for tasks (important and otherwise) and that can disrupt your schedule. Divided loyalty can end up happening with employees trying to please the managers instead of paying attention to training. The manager's role should be that of an observer and enforcer.

**Transitioning to Operations:** You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. One of the hardest parts of opening is trying to decide how long the trainers stay. There can easily be the attitude of 'Don't worry, they'll be gone soon, then we can do what we want.' It's hard to determine how long the trainers stay and to evaluate how long the opening training impacts the operations. Operations have to be sure that operations will be ready for the exit. There needs to be a good exit plan.

**Measuring Results:** It's important to measure the results of training. I zero in on two measurements: the guest satisfaction indicator or service score often known as the mystery shopper, and the hourly turnover rate. Shy away from using sales or profit as a measurement of your training. You don't have control over sales or profit, but you do have control over your training. Don't shirk your responsibility as a trainer, but be realistic-stick to things you can control. The measurement of training effectiveness should be agreed upon ahead of time.

**Who's Paying for this Mess?** Determine early who will be responsible for which expenses. Determine how you define opening expenses, what is capitalized, what isn't. For example, if the management team will be there six weeks earlier and will have petty cash and be allowed to purchase items, who will be responsible for monitoring costs? Be realistic in your expenses, not extravagant when considering items like trainer accommodations. Determine who plans versus who approves expenses, It all loops back to what your organization philosophy is. Opening training doesn't start nine days before the opening. It really starts ten to twelve weeks out.

**Selling Your Program:** The design and effectiveness of your program often comes down to selling your training program to the organization. Any trainer can say, I want the building ready by such and such a time. But in reality, you may not even get a week's worth of training in a ready building. How do you state your case?

Waiting a week to open so that you can have a 'guest ready' ready building that allows you to practice like you play costs sales dollars. You must make your case that the dollars lost will be made back by limiting the sales erosion off your peak numbers by being able to deliver a positive experience to more of your guests during your first few weeks of business, especially those experiencing your concept for the first time.

If you can prevent even five percent of that sales loss, then you will recapture the money you spent on training over the first few weeks of business.

You have to talk the language of operations. You have to sell it and know where they are coming from. Tell them why training matters and how you can ultimately make them money.

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