

Anxious Customers & Environmental Demands: Trends from the Chicago Restaurant Show - By Ken Burgin  
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The 2008 Trends Tour to Chicago & Las Vegas is just completed. Now it's time to digest the latest themes and information gathered from hundreds of exhibitors and the excellent seminar series.

Here are my first observations on trends and issues:

**Green Goes Mainstream.** Most restaurants and hotels have been recycling for years: bottles, cardboard and waste oil...but we've never told anyone. Now it's time to take the effort up several notches, finding ways to recycle heat and cut power consumption. And just as we insist on supplier documents for food safety, its time to ask for a lot more information to back up those 'green' claims. One first step 'guerilla step': unpack boxes and return them to the supplier - why should all that foam and cardboard be your problem?

If you're doing something positive, talk about it on your website and in the recruitment interviews. Here's a model Environmental Statement for your marketing material or website, and check the wide range of green links in the Community Resources Dept.

**Staff as Environmental Warriors.** School education now draws widely on environmental themes: science students analyse water quality in the local river, the mathematics lesson works out the statistics involved and rainwater is collected for flushing the toilets. Young staff (and your kids) grow up 'thinking green' and expect a workplace that respects the environment: do you give them a nice surprise or a nasty shock?

Sure, young people have a lot to learn about the real cost of doing business, but if you're experiencing problems retaining young staff, this may need attention. Be a hero, not a fossil...there's a ton of work to be done on this issue in every business, and if ever there was a project that could build motivation, this is it!

**Creating a Kitchen that Chefs Want to Work In.** Ever spent long hours in a hot, noisy white box, with harsh lights, smelly clothes, a hard floor and no lunch break? No wonder chefs go a little crazy, or leave the industry. In a great seminar at the NRA show on 'Kitchen of the Future', harsh conditions were just some of the many issues addressed. There are lots of ways to reduce heat, exhaust noise and aching legs, and if you don't offer it, expect staff to head off to those who do. A staff shower would be appreciated, so they can leave work smelling nice, not nasty, or cool down between long shifts.

Read the complete Tour Diary for a day by day description of the 2008 Trends Tour to Chicago & Las Vegas - click the purple button on the left.

**Easy as an iPod.** The downside of having so much technology to drive tills, ovens, payroll, lighting and security it that the complexity defeats the very people its meant to help. The new offer from smart equipment makers is that their controls are as easy to use as selecting your favourite song on an iPod. Or just like your digital camera, the 'automatic' setting works out the best options and takes away the guess work. One study quoted in a seminar said that in 60% of the computer-assisted equipment surveyed (eg ovens or POS), only one-tenth of the features were used. What a waste!

**Safety is a Mainstream Issue.** There's much less moaning about the cost and inconvenience of proper food and workplace safety - the risks are too high if you get it wrong. This message was repeated many times, by everyone from coffee franchises to small operators, and shows up in everything from automatic hand-towel dispensers to temperature alarms. When you've got the right policies in place, promote them for all to hear - here's a model Professional Health & Safety Statement to adapt and use.

**Authentic Food.** Whether it's customers asking about 'food miles', local production or organic vegetables, there's a genuine and growing hunger for food from known sources, honestly labeled and true to its origins. This is now mainstream - even my local barbecue chicken shop has a banner proclaiming its products are 'unbleached' and free of hormones and pesticides. The message on your menu needs to talk up the 'good stuff', and gently reassure.

**Steak Religion.** In the US it's tied in with myths of the wild west and 'home on the range', in Australia there's growing interests in cattle breeds and the place of origin. There's also more awareness of animal raising issues and humane treatment. Do your staff know where rib eye, sirloin or rump steak come from? What does grain feed actually mean? Beef marketing organizations usually have excellent training material.

**The Tragic Consequence of Corn Ethanol Production.** It's not the only reason for soaring grain prices, but there were plenty of comments from restaurateurs who are on the blunt end of subsidies that reward farmers to divert food into producing fuel. We all need to know more about this, as the consequences are worldwide.

**Food, Drink and the Retail Experience.** US foodservice shows us the best ways to add shopping to the food experience. Gift Cards are usually available online and in-store, with attractive cards to accompany them. Take home a t-shirt, cap or bottle of sauce. Fabulous Margaritaville is the fun end of the spectrum, and even upmarket Charlie Trotters sells books, chef jackets and knives.

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