

# Providing authentic customer experiences yields real results

Authenticity has become the operative word of the decade.

"Fake, contrived, disingenuous, phony, inauthentic. Do your customers use any of those words to describe what you sell or how you sell it?" ask James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II in their new book, "Authenticity."

That is exactly how more and more consumers view what companies offer them. People increasingly see the world in terms of real and fake, and want to buy something real from someone genuine, not a fake from some phony."

"Authenticity" builds on material presented in the authors' previous book, "The Experience Economy," to explain why product and service availability, cost and quality are only part of the customer satisfaction equation.

"What consumers want today are experiences — memorable events that engage them in an inherently personal way," they write, proceeding then to advise that we all live in a world rife with purposely contrived and sensationalized "unreal" experiences that may leave consumers wavering with uncertainty over their buying decisions.

Gilmore and Pine present a tall order indeed, but one that is coming to



**Donna L. Boss**

life in foodservice programs nationwide.

At the University of Rochester, authenticity is one of the main principles in the campus dining services' approach to sustainability initiatives.

"We're introducing procedures such as local purchasing and evaluating our carbon footprint in a sensible way that meets many criteria, including cost and quality," said Cam Schauf, the school's dining-services director. "We

developed a sustainable platform with input from students, faculty and staff. We are very open about the decision-making process. We listen to students who challenge our practices and respond by referring back to our platform before deciding whether or not to make changes.

"We're very sensitive about designing a composting program, for example, and don't want to be guilty of 'greenwashing,'" which Schauf defines as "just doing things that look green but aren't."

In December, a grab-and-go operation named "Connections" opened in the campus library. Nearly all products are produced locally — defined as primarily New York state-produced products, displayed with "Pride of New York" signs nearby.

Authenticity reportedly received top billing at Sodexo's National Chefs Conference, held in early January at Georgia Technical Institute in Atlanta for 266 chefs working in all of the company's divisions and for the military. In addition to sessions about Sodexo's sustainability efforts, the program emphasized authenticity in menu and concept development.

Along with suppliers demonstrating Latin and Southeast Asian dishes, guest speakers included Suvir Saran, owner of Devi restaurant in New York and a consultant to Sodexo on Indian cuisine; Mai Pham, a noted expert in Vietnamese and Thai cuisine who owns Leron-grass restaurant in Sacramento, Calif.; Latin American-Caribbean specialist Maricel Precilla, owner of Zafra in Hoboken, N.J.; and Roberto Santibanez, an authority on Mexican cuisine.

"New cuisines and flavors are introduced regularly as part of [Sodexo's] corporate-services retail platform," said Rich Arakelian, that division's national executive chef. "We emphasize authenticity, but also keep the recipes simple so we can source the ingredients and maintain consistency in all the units."

In keeping with Sodexo's push for authenticity, in April Arakelian's group plans to debut a tapas station dubbed "Small Plates." By summer, Asian rice paper spring rolls with Thai and Vietnamese dipping sauces will be rolled out.

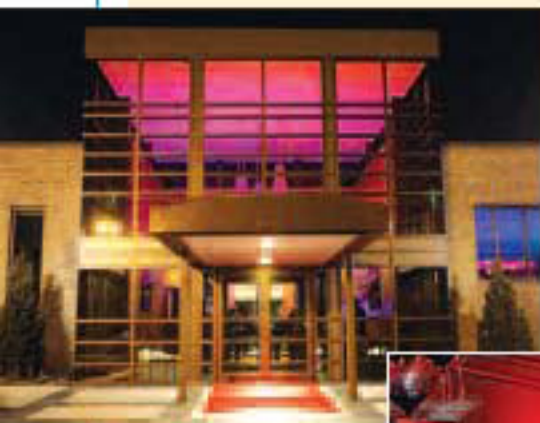
In a hospital setting, authenticity is introduced through roomservice, said Mary Spicer, director of food, nutrition, conference and telecommunications services for Presbyterian Hospital of Plano, Texas.

"When roomservice is truly cook-to-order, it provides the consumer with a more personalized experience," she said. Finding suppliers, offering customer education, providing staff training, ensuring consistency and installing appropriate equipment are among the challenges of managing authenticity. Yet rewards far outweigh difficulties. One of the most valuable rewards is the staff's renewed interest in learning more about their profession and craft.

"I ask our chefs to remember how they became interested in cooking and to remember the rich traditions of their families and friends," Arakelian said. "This brings out their inspiration and allows the passion to burn inside. That's what keeps life interesting." ■

**When managing authenticity, the rewards far outweigh the difficulties, many operators say.**

## Site seeing



### Hofstra University reopens fine-dining venue

Hempstead, N.Y. — More than 100 guests attended the grand unveiling of a 42-year-old Hofstra University institution made new again with the Jan. 23 reopening of the University Club.

Lackmann Culinary Services, which holds the foodservice contract at Hofstra, hosted the event, which showcased the extensive renovations made at the fine-dining catering facility which is popular for private parties and weddings.

Left, from left: Richard Maha, general manager of the University Club; Lisa Lahiji, Lackmann Culinary Services' marketing director for colleges and universities; and Rob McCabe, regional executive chef for Lackmann

The grand opening, held inside the club's ballroom, featured live entertainment, a Cuban cigar lounge and such delicacies as pheasant sausage with baby fig compote; Tuscan pizza topped with gorgonzola, poached pears and prosciutto; Mediterranean kebabs; and ice cream, in lemon-poppy, sun-dried cherry and goat cheese-chocolate-chipotle flavors.

Popular stops included a pizza and wine station as well as a Mediterranean room.

"Our goal was to leave a lasting impression as one of Long Island's premiere event venues," said Richard Maha, the club's general manager.



The reopening of the University Club, above, at Hofstra University featured dessert pizzas, right, as well as an ice cream station, far right.