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 customers want today are experiences—memorable events that engage them in an inherently personal way,” they write, proceeding to advise that we all live in a world with purposely contrived and sensationalized “unreal” experiences that may leave consumers wondering about their quality and decision-making.

Gilmore and Pine present a tall order indeed, but one that is coming to 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 Cami Schauf, the school’s dining services director. “We’ve developed a sustainable platform with input from students, faculty and staff. We’re 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 competitive 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, dispensed with “Pride of New York” signage nearby.

Authenticity reportedly received top billing at Sodexo’s National Chef Conference, held in early January at Georgia Tech in Atlanta for 265 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 Susie Samson, 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 Lemongrass restaurant in San Antonio, Calif.; Latin American–Caribbean specialist Marcelo Preciado, owner of Zafra in Hollywood, Miami, and Roberto Sartori, an authority on Mexican cuisine.

“New cuisines and flavors are introduced regularly as part of Sodexo’s corporate services retail platforms,” said Rich Anakatal, 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 Anakatal’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 room service, said Mary Spier, director of food, nutrition, conference and telecommunications services for Presbyterian Hospital of Phoenix, Arizona.

“When room service is truly cook-to-order, it provides the consumer with a more personalized experience,” she said.

Finding room service unique, offering excellent customer education, providing staff training, ensuring consistency and installing appropriate equipment are among the challenges of managing authenticity. Yet rewards far outweigh the difficulties, many operators say.

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Siteseeing

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: the opening of the University Club.

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

Left, from left: Richard Maha, general manager of the University Club; Lisa Lahji, Lachmann Catering Services marketing director for colleges and universities; and Rob McCabe, regional executive chef for Lachmann Catering Services.

The grand opening, held inside the club’s ballroom, featured live entertainment, a Cuban cigar lounge and such delicacies as champagne flowers, baby lemonade, a Tuscan pizza topped with gorgonzola, roasted and prosciutto, Mediterranean leg of lamb and ice cream, in lemon-pineapple, sundried cherry and goat cheese-chocolate-chip cookie flavors.

Popular items 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.