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Repairs and Maintenance

Ron Wilhite

When embarking on a restaurant remodel, the keys to success lie in reliable communication and agreed-upon expectations between facilities, the restaurant operator and the contractor. When a knowledgeable and proven contractor, with experience in restaurant remodels, effectively communicates expectations to the facility manager and the restaurant operator, and keeps those lines of communications open throughout the process, the door to a successful remodel is wide open.

Most remodels are initiated to bolster the customer experience in order to achieve increased revenue for greater returns on investment.

Because customers are often the focus behind remodeling projects, surveys and negative response cards about the décor, flooring, lighting and even odors can make restaurant management feel like there is a constant need to remodel. But on the upside, this helps pave the way for capital spending approvals. It's also important to note that an increase of as little as 3 percent in same-store sales will easily pay for most remodels.

On the other hand, back-of-house remodels typically only happen when the conditions put health and safety at risk, or if there is an equipment rollout. These remodels are sometimes done without any inconvenience to the customer and don't always have obvious ROI, thus they are harder to get financed and approved.

Customers are often drawn to a remodeled restaurant to see what is new and different. As such, operations should create a buzz about the remodel to promote the new and improved dining experience.

Regardless of the reason for a remodel, consider the following:

- How will a remodel affect the restaurant operator?
- How will it affect or inconvenience the customer?
- can you quantify the ROI?

Look Before You Leap

Before entering into a contract for a remodel, it's important the selected contractor is experienced in restaurant remodel environments, including:

Proper phasing

- Know what to tackle first, and in what sequence, to reduce customer impact and maintain a safe environment for all.
- Take a "critical path" approach, in order to minimize the restaurant downtime.
- Schedule time-sensitive tasks to reduce the risk of customer exposure (e.g., distasteful experiences during painting and staining). Don't always show your hand
- Make use of on- or off-site staging. (Hide your roll-off dumpsters and storage containers!)
- Don't draw unnecessary attention to yourself. It is an unfortunate side-effect that a remodel can also allow closer scrutiny and extra exposure to Health Department inspections.

Effectively identify and plan for site limitations or requirements, including storage, security and staged demolition. Don't bite off more than you can chew.

Let's look at an example of biting off more than you can chew: To get ahead of schedule, an overzealous contractor demolished too much of the restaurant in one night instead of working in stages. The project

supervisor did not follow the communicated plan, allowing his demolition contractor to go unchecked. This nearly caused the restaurant to be shut down by health inspectors.

There is a limited amount of work that can be accomplished in one night. This is one of the many reasons that remodel costs are always higher than new builds.

Talk the Talk

Communication and a good relationship with your contractor can also identify improper operational practices (e.g., night-time cleaning procedures), which can then be corrected. Contractors and sub-contractors are your eyes and ears for what is going on behind the scenes and after hours. Knowing the abilities and experience of your contractor is paramount to a successful remodel.

The importance of communicating reasonable expectations and delivering on them cannot be overstated. At the end of the day, what separates a successful project from one of a lesser grade generally comes down to clearly stating what you intend to do, and actually doing what you say you will. From the contractor's perspective, remodels can pose very specific obstacles. Knowing in advance how to best maneuver and overcome these obstacles can be the difference between failure and success.

Keep in mind, the key aspects to a remodel are planning, communication and scheduling. You must establish clear expectations for the operator and facility manager, identify potential pitfalls in advance, and queue up subs and vendors just in case. All of these elements go into the proper and effective process of establishing realistic expectations between the facility or construction manager, operations, and the employees and subcontractors.

The key takeaway for any remodel job is this: Make sure your contractor has the experience and proven track record to do the job; create an open and constant line of communication between facilities, the operator and contractor; and finally, discuss expectations early and often to avoid discrepancies later in the project.

Follow these basic principles for restaurant remodels—both in front and in back of house—and the door to a successful project will remain open.

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