

CASE STUDY

TURNING DETAILS INTO DIFFERENTIATORS:

HOW A SMALL FAST-CASUAL CHAIN CREATES A STAND-OUT ENVIRONMENT

In cities across the U.S., record-high numbers of restaurants are driving increasing competition – squeezing margins and leading restaurants to tighten their budgets and reduce spending across their businesses. But the VP of Operations of a local fast-casual chain in one Texas metro market is taking a different approach: Instead of cutting the little things, he's turning details into differentiators. Meticulous attention to creating an exceptional environment is helping the nine-location chain build its brand around a stand-out experience – every day, at every location, for every customer.

Three top priorities – and CLEAN is #1

“We strive to achieve three things: a knowledgeable and happy staff, consistent execution of our food, and clean restaurants,” says VP. Of these three, restaurant cleanliness “is 100% our top priority” because of its impact on the other two. “If our people aren't working in a clean environment, their morale goes down – whether they realize it or not – and that transfers directly to the customer,” he says. In addition, the VP notes that a clean environment helps the fast-casual chain combat the labor shortage impacting the food service market: “It's easier to attract good people – and it helps us reduce turnover.” With a team of happy, knowledgeable staff, the chain can better achieve its third goal: consistent execution of great food.

The biggest factor in the customer experience

The VP has a strong belief about what drives customer satisfaction and return business: “They'll tell you it's the food, but it really comes down to the atmosphere and environment.” Whether they realize it or not, he says every customer is constantly evaluating the cleanliness of the environment – from the entryway, to the tables and floors in the front of the house, to their open kitchens, to the restrooms. They notice even subtle shortcomings—often subconsciously. “They're turned off. There's something they didn't like. But they often don't even realize that it was because of cleanliness issues,” he explains.

An easy opportunity: low investment – high return

After years in the restaurant world, this “seasoned” foodservice veteran says far too many restaurants are missing the easy opportunity to stand out through cleanliness. “They're trying to compete with cheap food prices, or they're worried about fast ticket times – and they're missing the most crucial part of running a successful restaurant,” says the VP. Often, it's an awareness problem: “A lot of owners don't even realize they're not as clean as they should or could be,” he says. To gain valuable outside perspective and drive continual improvement, the fast-casual chain relies on its Ecolab representative and brings in a third-party auditing service. “We don't want to wait for our customers or the health department to tell us that we've got a problem,” the VP says.

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Weaving clean into the culture

"We walk each trainee around on their first day and show them how it works – what to clean, what to use, how to clean, how often," the VP explains, "We want cleaning to be ingrained – so it's just instinctive to get it done right, every time. We've created a comprehensive cleaning protocol for each location, including daily checklists (AM, PM and closing), as well as weekly and monthly checklists. Once a quarter, each location has a "Deep Clean Party." The VP says the fast-casual chain has been successful in gaining staff buy-in for their culture of clean because they've focused on the "what's in it for me?" angle: "They see the difference they can make – the fruits of their labor," he says, "They see that it's more enjoyable to come in to work in a clean environment, and frankly, all that cleaning makes their shifts go by a lot more quickly."

A foundation for growth

The thriving fast-casual brand is already adding two more locations. As the VP of Operations focuses on maintaining the same outstanding experience as the business grows, he says a simple, reliable cleaning program is critical: "We want to make sure every location is using the same products – the right products – and that they're using them the same way – the right way." Simple consistency is also what the VP seeks from the chain's vendor partners. "I don't want to waste time juggling multiple vendors," he says, "The fact that I have one Ecolab rep that I can call for everything – that makes me very happy." But he's quick to note that the best vendor partners go beyond delivering convenience, anticipating needs, solving problems and ultimately supporting brand and business growth: "Cleaning is our top priority. But to be honest, I just don't have to think much about it," he says, "My Ecolab rep knows what we use and what we need. He makes sure we have the right products and the right process – so I can focus on growing our business."

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