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Changes in college and school foodservice continue to mirror the evolution of other noncommercial segments, including corporate feeding.

In Scott Reitano's vision for what makes noncommercial foodservice entities so successful, the most important utensils aren't the knife, fork and spoon.

"[People] eat with their eyes," says Reitano, principal of the Indianapolis-based [Reitano Design Group](#). "In the case of a K-12 foodservice operator, for example, that stereotypical five-compartment tray is not going down the stainless-steel line anymore. Or at least it should not be. You want a servery that, quite frankly, looks like a college servery. Food venue aesthetics mean something, and consumers look for what appears fresh to them. Today's consumer will buy sushi at a convenience store, but it's got to look good and be merchandised properly."

Along with the products being merchandised properly, another contributing factor to the noncommercial entities' success is allowing customers the autonomy to order exactly what they want. Take, for example, students. "They never met a menu that they didn't think they could just change and customize," Reitano says. "So, customization is a big thing for this generation. They will order the daily special but will ask the operator to make it without a couple of ingredients while adding a few others."

Customers across all segments want what they perceive to be healthier options, too. "We all talk a heathier game than we eat," Reitano says. "It's not just, 'Hey, here's the healthy section over here in the corner.' School foodservice, and other segments for that matter, wants healthy options throughout the menu and throughout the venue."

Perhaps the group wielding the most consumer power is Gen Z, which is defined as people who were born between 1997 and 2012. Having grown up with essentially everything available to them by just clicking a mouse or tapping their handheld devices, Gen Z's influence had led to foodservice designers and their clients developing serving spaces that offer greater flexibility in terms of customization, fresh food perception, options for their food and extended hours of operation.

Reitano refers to Gen Z and Gen Alpha as "nontraditional customers because they have nontraditional eating habits. They don't want breakfast or lunch during the traditional meal periods. They will do things more on their own schedules. They're grazers. They like to have a little bit here and a little bit there. A couple of years ago, we ran a focus group with some college kids for a university client and asked what meals look like to them. And there was one kid who I thought said it beautifully. He said that he'd probably grab one or two meals and then snack his way through the rest of the day. And I was like, 'Yep.' That's reflective of today's students."

So how does that shifting approach impact noncommercial foodservice? "You're going to need to be open some extended hours," Reitano notes. "How do you allow operationally for your team to go home when they need to go home but still have food available? Autonomous retail may become a more prominent option as a result."

One design idea that helps address the new ebb and flow of customers is what Reitano calls “distributed dining.” This concept places the emphasis on meeting the consumer halfway or most of the way by placing foodservice options closer to them.

“Not everybody wants to go all the way to the cafeteria,” Reitano says. “There’s also a mental health aspect to distributed dining that says people need some alone time or some downtime. They may be at a counter with a hightop chair and they’re kind of zoning out or they may be looking at their phone or listening to their music. Whatever that might be, that’s part of distributed dining.”

The concept of distributed dining applies to a variety of noncommercial segments by adding a layer of convenience and helps meet time-starved consumers where they are on a particular campus. “Distributed dining in a workplace is important when you only have 30 minutes for lunch,” Reitano says. “If you are going to offer foodservice in a corporate environment it’s important to ask, “Can everybody can get to that one congregated space in a timely manner?” If not, consider bringing the food to them possibly using smaller neighborhood hubs.”

And if someone wants a snack later in the day, it may not make sense to keep the servery open. That’s where autonomous retail featuring quality food made by the on-site culinary team comes into play. “It’s about food availability and quality food availability,” Reitano adds. “It’s not the triangle egg salad sandwich that would go around the vending machine and you would wonder how old that thing is. It’s not old-style vending but truly a different kind of vibe and a different way to do that.”

In other words, if you cook it, they will come. “The people that are eating 24/7 the most are hanging out in college right now,” he says. “They have some time on their hands, and they’re hungry. Looking at high schools, it’s been a long time since we’ve done a project in this segment that doesn’t have some sort of a cafe involved or those are morphing into a cafe/marketplace or a health bar with smoothies and acai bowls and things like that. Food availability in higher ed is leading the way, and we see it permeate the other foodservice segments as well.”

By paying close attention to the goings-on in higher education and the success taking place there in providing high-quality food in attractive settings to those students, foodservice decision makers in other segments, including high schools and grade schools, as well as those designers with whom they are collaborating remain hopeful they can experience the same or better results.

“The one market segment that’s benefited the most from this has to be the K-12 market,” Reitano says. “It’s about a transaction. Higher education’s influence is leading to our making changes to make the high school level look different. And those changes eventually makes their way to the middle school, which is a little bit different functionally speaking, but middle school foodservice is definitely evolving as well.”

And that leads to noncommercial operators offering menu items and service styles that mirror commercial foodservice experiences. “We’re seeing trends that show us local and natural and fresh foods all matter,” Reitano says. “And on an elementary school level, we’re really seeing a greater emphasis on health, getting kids into the right eating habits and enticing children to eat healthier. We’re watching those cues from other markets for sure.

“The chief benefactor from all that has to be watching the growth and seeing noncommercial operators say, ‘Wait a minute. This isn’t just a production facility over here and this isn’t just a transaction. This is hospitality.’”

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