

TRENDS CONSUMERS

The hand that rocks the cradle



Karim Asmar, managing partner at Hodema consulting services, takes a look at new trends in school catering

School catering is a jackpot. Any caterer would love to have a shot, as the volume and repeat business are too attractive to be passed by. True, it holds many challenges related to cost and nutrition that have frustrated more than one professional. Add to this the deep concern of both institutions and parents for the children's health. Staying in this business is surely like a roller coaster ride.

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Nutrition awareness

The World Health Organization has been intensifying its campaigning for healthy nutrition with a focus on educating and helping the youth to develop healthy eating habits. Governments are also relaying the same message. In the UAE, the ministry of education launched a program to encourage healthy eating targeting 100 schools, while in the KSA the ministry of education is developing a Unified School Food Program. Such efforts also require educating the parents to complement and enforce sound eating habits outside the school.

Let's take the story of Majid, the manager of a catering company, who convinced his partners to expand their catering business to schools. His argument was that an institution able to cater to the younger generation and follow them throughout their growth could secure long-term business.

Alarming statistics

The World Health Organization predicts that with eating habits remaining the same, obesity and diabetes are projected to triple in the next two decades, passing from 15.2 million to 42.6 million. The Middle East has the highest proportion of overweight and obesity in its population. In studies and statistics released by The Economist Lebanon, Qatar and Kuwait rank among the top 10 countries with the highest proportion of overweight and obese people. As a result, efforts have been intensified in these countries to teach children sound eating habits.

A difficult choice

Most often, customer focus on cost efficiency and lower price pushes caterers to focus on volume to compensate. Although important, grade and quality of ingredients will somewhat give in to accommodate cost and profit targets. Recent increases in fuel prices have resulted in higher cost of production and raw material, adding to the stress on profit margins for caterers and price sensitivity for caterers and buyers.

Going back to Majid, the school board and parents committee insisted on freshness of products, nutritional quality, and a menu mix stressing on



the integration of vegetables. The school intended to run an avant-garde food program to educate the students on healthy eating habits. The caterer had to provide a full food and beverage solution covering a full meal, snacks and beverages.

International Standards

In line with recent trends in the US and UK schools, such requests included the elimination of soft drinks, the transformation of vending machines for fruit distribution and the use of fresh and locally grown vegetables. Green tea, fresh fruit juices and smoothies are to gradually replace soft drinks. Chocolate bars and peanuts were replaced with cereal bars and fresh fruits. Main courses favored salads, and grilled items with a balanced mix of vegetables. A study commissioned by Sodexo to study the evolution of taste among its customers, ranked locally grown fruits and vegetables as number one favorite in school and colleges cafeterias in USA in 2009.

Caterer role is changing

The role of the school caterer is changing and gaining in complexity especially as schools look for global solution providers and education partners to develop sound eating behavior. The school caterer's role is changing and it is becoming a partner in education. The caterer also has to make an effort to promote the food. In addition to preparing healthy food, school caterers have to gain support from the students and encourage them to eat a healthy meal. This could be through student focus groups to elaborate the menu or by introducing live cooking.

Commitment and finance

At the end of his meeting, Majid had many new ideas, from an open kitchen and live cooking stations, to the display and use of fresh vegetables. However, a major concern clouded the picture: how committed was the school and what was

Top school catering rising trends

- Focus on quality nutritional values
- Use of fresh seasonal products
- Use of organic products
- Waste management
- Energy saving
- Educational school farms
- Fresh juices and healthy drinks
- Healthy snacks and fruits
- Global catering solutions
- Governments campaign
- Promotion of natural products
- Innovative presentations

the allocated budget? Providing a full healthy food solution puts a lot of stress on the caterers operation. The caterer has to put in place a system to handle the management of dispatching fresh products with limited shelf life, as well as implementing cooking practices that preserve the nutritional value of ingredients. In return this means higher costs.

Healthy eating and the promotion of healthy eating is still in the early stages. The serving tray and the self-service rail have to be challenged. UK celebrity chef Jamie Oliver launched a campaign requesting more attention from the British ministry of health. In his view, school catering personnel require more training and institutions more funding. While the need for healthy eating in schools is generally agreed on, how much resources to allocate to it is still a matter for debate.

Trends for 2010 & beyond

The general social trends are towards green, sustainable energy usage and recycling. Every business is affected and they are investing in building their profile and image to that of responsible and green companies. School caterers may find that they have to adopt solutions to reconcile convenience packaging of food with environmentally friendly packaging.

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5 minutes with



George Beyrouthi, general manager, **Sodexo Services Liban**

"In stimulating intellectual development and providing learning opportunities, schools and colleges play a crucial role in the development of each individual. Schools in Lebanon should give high priority to their onsite school catering programs by seeking professional help in designing and delivering food-service solutions. The health and wellbeing of our children is a joint responsibility between the school, the parents and the food service provider. A close cooperation and open communication

should exist between the three to ensure that the children are receiving their daily nutritional requirements. Sodexo aims to assure safe, nutritional education programs and a variety of foodservice offerings adapted to the age and specific needs of each group."

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