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## Restaurant Evolution - Part III

### Santé Magazine

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Managers Focus on Quality Products and Services  
By Sharon McDonnell

(continued)

**How do you go about taking the pulse of your target audience and gathering valuable feedback from them?**

**Schwartz:** We use comment cards, and if we see or hear a complaint, we try to address it.

**McBeth:** Qdoba rolled out a "Voice of the Guest Program" in February, inviting guests to rate aspects of their experience on a seven-point scale on a Web site or by calling, and we're receiving valuable feedback. We also do an annual awareness survey across demographic segments to test how customers feel about us compared to our competition, to see the progress of our brand.

**Svensson:** After an event, we send a critique request, and we want [customers] to feel free [to talk] about what they like or don't like.

**Sandoval:** We use comment cards and inspection reports from mystery shoppers, who visit each of our restaurants incognito twice a month---a great service that helps me see their experience with food as a diner, as well as service.

**Kornick:** I train the team to be active listeners and to be willing to change what they're doing for better customer satisfaction. Each table should be visited by management at least once during a meal, not just to check up but to ask about what they might like in the future.

**Robinson:** Comment cards are used in all our restaurants. OpenTable also helps, from seating preferences to a [reminder of a] bad experience in the past.

**What is your most difficult staffing challenge, and how have you gone about meeting it?**

**Kornick:** We're changing the way we look at resumes for servers---a big shift. Twenty years ago, the people you wanted were out there and available. With chefs, the craft of the profession is deteriorating; people don't know how to cut steak or make pastry, and restaurants can't afford to cook from scratch. Lots of chefs aren't as interested in cooking certain products, and the American palate isn't prone to ordering them, so the techniques of cooking those products is being lost.

**Robinson:** Both Scala's Bistro and Harry Denton's Skylight Room nightclub are incredibly busy high-end places. The challenge is our Caffè Espresso: high-volume but minimal tips and low-wages. So we try to have great training programs and do fun stuff as a group, motivating our staff with non-work-related events. Our coffee provider takes a handful of employees for coffee-tasting and presentation, and we do team-building like with a pizza party or bowling.

**McBeth:** Keeping pace with our growth. We're in 40 states now and slated to open 85 to 95 restaurants over the next year, both company-owned and franchised. We're offering aggressive incentives for referrals from our top performers, borrowing top performers from other industries, such as retail, and broadening our profiles.

**Schwartz:** It's so expensive to live here that it's hard to find qualified people to fill jobs, even though we pay good wages. I do lots of networking and have contacts with several culinary schools.

**Svensson:** Since the Statler Hotel is a teaching hotel where 250 to 300 part-time Cornell students work, we sometimes have staffing challenges on exam nights. But we run the hotel with a core of full-time staff.

**Sandoval:** In Washington, we had difficulties in hiring managers due to tightness in the market, so we now try to promote from within.

**How are you adjusting your service to meet and exceed rising customer expectations and outclass your competition?**

**Sandoval:** We now have monthly food tastings with our chef, because the more vivid the food is on the tip of their tongues, the more excited the servers are in explaining it to a customer. Wine distributors and winery representatives come in to train our staff to understand wine and how to pair it with our food.

**Robinson:** Kimpton has service standards in place for all of our restaurants, and we use mystery shoppers a couple of times each quarter.

**Svensson:** Anyone can get the basics done. We think always about the details---talking to customers, customizing as much as possible, treating people like they're coming into your home. If they love M&Ms, make sure a bowl is there. It's important to personalize things.

**Schwartz:** We do a ton of training every week, from doing proper pours to the importance of guest names.

**How have you responded to changes in customers' food preferences?**

**Schwartz:** We put out a new menu early this year, separating sections into classics---straightforward stuff like rib chop with horseradish cream or salmon with asparagus in brown butter sauce---and contemporary, such as trout encrusted in corn meal and marble-sized potatoes in three colors sauteed in olive oil, served with violet mustard ground with grape skins and beurre blanc. We change our tasting menu every couple of days. In L.A., we're the first to know about any trend. The trend now is moderation. Asian is incredibly popular, lots of beef and fish, clean flavors, not overly complicated like 15 ingredients with a tower on top.

**Sandoval:** We try to be more cutting-edge and aggressively add different dishes to our menus, starting at one restaurant first. For example, we introduced chicken with achiote, a traditional dish from Veracruz, at Maya in New York, and then to our other restaurants. Our latest Maya opens in Dubai in August in Hotel Royal Meridien on the beach---a new market. We're prepared to tone down our heat levels and adjust the menu accordingly.

**Kornick:** We try to do a broad-based menu that doesn't have a common thread, [which is] easier at N9NE Steakhouse as the entrees are more a la carte.

**McBeth:** We do a lot of R&D focus groups with our loyalty and "Voice of the Guest" programs. Our Web site, qdoba.com, has a nutritional calculator and recommendations on what to eat to reduce calories such as taco salad without the shell. We have a progressive menu with signature sauces for burritos like poblano pesto, made with poblano peppers, and rice infused with lime and cilantro, and we got into the groove of changing the taste of our guests. We just tested Mexican Gumbo with very good feedback, and we hope to roll it out late this year.

**Robinson:** There's a big push for organic, so we made the move to locally grown and raised organic products and meats as much as we can Kimpton-wide. Here in California it's particularly important.

**Svensson:** The biggest request we're getting in the last few years is the Atkins/South Beach diet. On breaks, [guests] ask for some protein, like cheese or nuts; for breakfast, sliced ham or cheese and tropical juices and nectars, not just orange and grapefruit.

**What has been your most successful beverage or food promotion this past year?**

**Robinson:** Our pastry chef rolled out mini-desserts a year ago---versions of our \$7 to \$8 desserts for \$3, for people who just want a couple of bites. . . , or are inclined not to order dessert, or want to assemble their own sampling platter. We introduced a "Million-Dollar Cocktails" promotion with prices ranging from \$80 to \$650 in Harry Denton's Starlight Room last year, selling, for example, the Angel's Share with Remy Martin Louis XIII Cognac, tawny Port aged 20 years, and Domaine Charbay Walnut Liqueur for \$200. It was a simple promotion where some companies donated ingredients, but we won a tremendous amount of publicity from the *Wall Street Journal* to local TV.