



Missed Opportunities

What Restaurants Should Have Learned From The Pandemic

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The well-known English writer H.G. Wells famously wrote, “*Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature’s inexorable imperative.*” This has been the lived reality of many hospitality businesses the last few years.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world, we watched as thousands of restaurants shut their doors, sent their staff home with little certainty, and restaurant owners scoured their financial books trying to keep their businesses afloat.

We also watched creativity flourish as many small- and medium-sized restaurants tested new ways of practicing hospitality and pioneered new channels to reach their customers. Those thriving now, are the ones who approached the pandemic as a new challenge and found ways to adapt.

But sadly, many restaurants did very little to adapt to the changes imposed on them by the pandemic, holding tightly to “*business as usual*” thinking patterns instead. Now, those same businesses simply cannot cope amidst a new restaurant environment with changing customer demands and more innovative options available. So, what made the difference between a restaurant’s success and failure in COVID-19 times? I think central to many businesses’ success was their ability and willingness to prioritize their customers’ needs and desires over their own. Those who keenly listened to their customers learned how to adapt to the changing climate. And those who continue to do so as restrictions lift, are emerging miles ahead of their competitors.

That’s because the restaurant industry is not and will not be the same again. A major reshuffle has occurred and it’s naive to assume the world will go back to what it was. Those who placed their bets on their old business models are now in a moment of reckoning. They have no choice but to adapt or perish.

As a senior lecturer at [Swiss Hotel Management School](#) (SHMS) in [Caux, Switzerland](#), it’s my goal to adequately prepare students for a career in hospitality business management, and the pandemic has been rife with

important lessons. Here are four mistakes I saw small- and medium-size restaurants make during the pandemic:

Remaining stuck in old traditions and habits

The majority of small- and medium-size restaurants are family businesses and base their operations on tradition and well-worn habits. Instruction and training is generally carried out verbally and relationally by managers or fellow employees. Without operational guidelines in place, many owners and employees were left scrambling to know how to adapt to the onslaught of changes the pandemic triggered. Those who waited too long for the storm clouds to clear or struggled to reshuffle to meet new demands, found themselves against the wall with little choice but to close their doors.

Avoiding new technology

When the pandemic hit, we saw a shift towards new technologies and digital solutions. Restaurants who embraced innovation with open arms saw greater success with online ordering, reaching their customers through social media, and more. Restaurants that didn't see the value or didn't take the time to learn, lost them to competitors. And as doors reopen now, those who continue to utilize these technologies while resuming their traditional in-house dining experience are seeing significant results and an improved customer experience.

Maintaining the same menu options

Restaurants that gained an edge during the pandemic were the ones that adjusted their menu to fit changing customer needs and demands. They simplified their menus from a full array of choices to a few dishes executed well and leaned into their strengths. This continues to serve them well now as they navigate challenging staffing issues, ever-changing restrictions and hygiene protocols, and rising food costs. This simplification also allows employees to focus better on delivering a better customer experience.

Deprioritizing customers' needs and desires

Before the pandemic, a restaurant was judged for its quality based on the size of the crowd. However, as the pandemic lingers on, hygiene and safety are increasingly of concern to customers.

Are the staff following protocols? Are they masked? Are the tables adequately spaced out to accommodate social distancing? Is there contactless pick-up? These are all concerns and questions of customers, and those who fail to consider them, lose them.

But all hope is not lost. Restaurants who may still be struggling *can* survive the new landscape of hospitality if they are willing to make a few adjustments:

Focus on improving the customer experience

As guests return to dine in-person, consider the welcome they receive. Is it warm and inviting or apathetic? Is there eye contact and open body language or do staff appear too busy? Encourage employees to take the extra step to make it a memorable experience for customers and listen to their feedback with an open mind as to how you can improve.

Offer more staff incentives

Many small- and medium-sized restaurants are finding it hard to hire new or keep existing quality staff as restrictions ease. To attract seasoned and skilled employees, restaurant managers must consider incentives and perks in order to attract the right staff.

Attract more customers during off-peak hours

Many restaurants do not see that they are inadvertently encouraging customers to dine at their establishment within a short window. Instead, find ways to incentivize more customers to dine in off-peak hours by lowering menu prices outside of rush periods or creating offers during specific times that can influence some to change their normal lunch or dinner habits. By spreading out service hours, it also allows restaurants to provide better service in a more relaxed and caring atmosphere.

There are no quick fixes or simple solutions for restaurants navigating a post-COVID world, but there are ways to hedge against the risks. As Sun Tzu says, "*In the midst of chaos there is also opportunity.*"

That's what I strive to teach my hospitality students at SHMS. I continue to teach traditional service techniques, but believe we must also adequately equip them with the innovative mindset, problem solving skills, and knowledge of technology they will need to navigate the evolving future of restaurants.

Philippe Gueltzer is a senior lecturer at Swiss Hotel Management School in Caux, Switzerland – ranked third best in the world for hospitality education. Philippe Gueltzer has over 25 years' experience in hospitality operations, including 15 years in advisory, management, and executive positions, on all five continents.