When a Food Quality Issue Goes Viral: The Case of Stop Bugging Me with the Broccoli!

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Introduction

Manufacturers commonly use contract foodservice companies to provide onsite cafeteria service (Society for Hospitality and Foodservice Management, 2015). The cafeterias are open while employees are working, often covering several shifts. Historically, cafeterias are viewed as an important amenity, but with pressures to control or even reduce costs, facilities do not always receive the investment needed to prevent aging infrastructure (Rosales, 2014). This case took place in a cafeteria built during the 1960's, where the contract foodservice company provided around the clock foodservice at a site within the main manufacturing building. The broccoli incident took place in a building within a larger corporate campus. The site where the incident occurred employed union workers across a total of three shifts. On average, one-third of these employees purchased items from the cafeteria each day, with the evening shift serving the lowest volume. The cafeteria staff consisted of a small team who shared cooking, cashiering, serving, and cleaning responsibilities. The manufacturing employees were regulated to a time enforced break; therefore, it was critical they were served quickly after the moment they entered the cafeteria. During a recent evening shift, the team underestimated the number of broccoli portions to prepare, causing customers to wait while more was prepared. The broccoli was a side item served along with prime rib, one of the top selling menu items. Events quickly spiraled out of control when a staff member took a short-cut and failed to follow standard food preparation procedures. This lead to a customer discovering his undercooked vegetables crawling with small insects. He then addressed the issue in one of the most impactful ways possible, beginning his own social media campaign.

Following the reading of the case study and completion of the discussion questions provided, the reader should be able to:

- Describe some challenges unique to contract foodservice
- Understand quality assurance and training in a contract foodservice setting
- Explain how social media can impact foodservice establishments

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Story Background

The Environment

Fleet Incorporated (Fleet) is a prominent manufacturing company located in the Northeast United States. Central to the ability of Fleet to maintain production efficiency is the requirement of a quality foodservice operation located near their manufacturing lines. To ensure the quality of this provision, Fleet recently hosted a foodservice evaluation process over a period of more than eighteen months, resulting in the retention of their existing long-term foodservice contracting company, Cater-Fresh, one of the largest on the Northeast Coast. The contract retention is an indication that Fleet has been satisfied with the overall performance of Cater-Fresh.

Within this vast environment are numerous buildings, each provisioned with a cafeteria to provide meal options for Fleet employees. Due to the size of the facility, there is no opportunity to leave the location during a break; therefore meals must be purchased in one of the cafeterias or brought from home. The company employs over 10,000 associates throughout a corporate campus with nearly one thousand in the facility where the incident occurred. A unique aspect of the Fleet site is that the facility follows strict security protocols which are tightly enforced, designed to prevent unauthorized individuals from accessing the site.

Roughly 30% of the employees choose to eat from the cafeterias, a metric that is consistent with the manufacturing industry as a whole (Society for Hospitality and Foodservice Management, 2015). Over three separate shifts, the cafeteria staff serves a total of 300 meals, with the evening shift providing 50 meals nightly. The cafeterias offer a hot meal service as well as grab and go options designed to support employee breaks that are regulated to 30 minutes and strictly enforced. The particular cafeteria referenced in this case is surrounded by other buildings each with their own cafeterias, all within a five-minute walk. However, throughout the corporate campus employees will generally choose to eat at the cafeteria connected to their building, mainly due to time not desire. This particular cafeteria was originally built in the late 1960's and although maintenance has been performed as needed it has not been updated for appearance, aesthetics, or employee comfort, which has lead to employee complaints in the past.

Business to Business Relationship

Cater-Fresh integrates with Fleet through a network of managers who work for the manufacturing company. A system of performance indicators is used to evaluate and track business performance across

all cafeterias, in all buildings. Referred to as key performance indicators, these include items such as opening on time, the variety required, customer satisfaction, and program participation targets. Fleet's reputation amongst their employees is dependent upon the successful performance of the vendor. Employee services within this large manufacturing site are often targets for criticism and are therefore closely watched and carefully managed. With a unionized workforce, the employee's voice is strong with company management and though some minor issues have occurred between the employees and Cater-Fresh, nothing in the past has been spread around the campus like a few of the minor issues (timeliness; customer service) recently.

Related Literature

Quality Assurance & Training

A majority of reported cases involving customers who got sick from food can be traced back to licensed businesses and eating establishments (Cotterchio, Gunn, Coffill, Tormey, & Barry, 1998). While this particular case never involved an illness, the failure to follow safety protocols resulted in a situation for the foodservice contractor that was equally devastating. Incorrect or neglectful food handling practices lead to safety and security risks causing lasting consequences for everyone involved (Cotterchio et al., 1998). Consumers report a near zero-tolerance when it comes to dirty food in a restaurant establishment, as their primary reason for the visit is typically to consume food (Park & Almanza, 2015). However, this is not new, and since adhering to practical, standardized operating models results in a high success rate, and when combined with training can avert food safety issues associated with food production, has been recommended for years (Wodi & Mill, 1985).

Irrespective of cost, foodservice companies must provide their teams with continuous training, requiring them to follow strict processes and prioritize customer safety as their primary concern (Yiannas, 2009). As this case highlights, there are new risks organizations must consider when making decisions on how much to invest in quality assurance and training. As with other service-industry areas, Canziani (2016) reported employees and managers need training in empathy towards the affected individual along with being able to provide personalized service and corrections.

The Environment & Customer Service

Often referred to as servicescapes, physical environments can have a significant impact on customers' perceptions of quality (Chua, Othman, Boo, Abkarim, & Ramachanddran, 2010). Chua, Othman, Boo, Abkarim, and Ramachanddran (2010) explained that environments perceived as unfavorable negatively influence customers' psychological state and can trigger a heightened chance of dissatisfaction with the experience overall. When this is taken one step further and unfavorable servicescapes are combined with the absence of favorable guest service, something like bug-infested broccoli can become an enormous issue (Chua et al., 2010).

In this case there was a compounded effect, where the combination of an unfavorable physical environment, less than acceptable service, and unacceptable food quality standards resulted in a dramatic and disruptive customer response. For foodservice establishments, customers have previously highlighted food, service, and atmosphere as important expectations (Bufquin, Partlow, & DiPietro, 2015).

Contrary to this, research has also identified a correlation between the physical condition of a restaurant environment and customers' expectations that create positive outcomes. Older locations can be successful due to lower customer expectations than what they expect to find in modern environments (Wall & Berry, 2007). This understanding may present an opportunity for older locations as research illustrates that customer service and meaningful human interaction can overcome negative environmental factors. This case suggests that the service provided was inadequate to overcome the food quality incident. In aging facilities, customer service and food quality must be the focus, and this case is an example of where it comes up short. The successful provision of quality food and exceptional customer service often determines whether the business can retain customers and attract new ones, not necessarily the condition of the infrastructure itself. Failures, in the absence of exceptional customer service, can help feed into an environment of retribution (Oflac, Sullivan, & Baltacioglu, 2012). In this case, that is exactly what occurred, as the customer pursued a social media campaign focused on retribution. These factors aside, in the foodservice business nothing substitutes quality as the most fundamental attribute of the product itself (Meiselman, 2001).

Social Media

Today, whether an establishment is a hole-in-the-wall or a fine dining operation, social media can have an impact (positive or negative) on the restaurant operation from the perspective of customer visits (new or returning), sales, and marketing. The contract foodservice segment, however, is a little different when compared to the restaurant segment, in that social media did not have such an impactful presence at first (Lautenschlager, 2006). Before social media existed anywhere, it used to be that one disgruntled customer told about ten people, which seemed dangerous then (Goodman & Newman, 2003). However, with the growth of social media, Corstjens and Umblijs (2012) explained that today one disgruntled customer could reach thousands, or even millions, in a single keystroke and the damage caused by negative social media significantly outweighs any positive contributions. Thus, businesses today operate in a new age of information transparency, and customers are using social media to instantly communicate the good, the bad, and the ugly. Flaming is a modern term used to describe the adverse impacts of a social media slander campaign; today it is a common occurrence (Verma, Nitin, & Srivastava, 2016). Reputations are at stake as consumers' perceptions and comments can blur the lines between libel and slander, leading to serious business sustainability issues (Svantesson, 2009). Svantesson (2009)

stated that to survive in the modern age, company owners and managers must develop strategic social media strategies to understand both the nature of social media and human interest in sharing experiences digitally. There is also a reality check that must be acknowledged in all of this; controlling free speech through social media, and in this case, the customer's use of it, is simply not an option. This leaves businesses at a crossroads in how to evaluate the new public relations risk posed by social media and whether it warrants a rethinking of how and what we invest in our operations to mitigate the chances of receiving negative publicity.

The Situation

The Dinner-shift Foodservice Team

Three meal services were offered throughout the day to align with manufacturing staffing levels. The cafeteria was open from 3:00 PM-9:00 PM for dinner service. Of the 50 meals served per night, the majority were provided between 6:30 PM-7:00 PM, coordinating with employee break times. Due to the small number of meals served, a cohesive team of three Cater-Fresh employees covered this shift, consisting of a supervisor and two employees. A majority of the food was prepared on site; however, the use of convenience based products and semi-homemade items were leveraged due to the extensive menu and small foodservice team.

The small team of three had been working together since 2013, and along with the manufacturing employees, they were also unionized. Jeff was the evening supervisor while Mary and Rick were hourly employees. Jeff was a tenured foodservice employee with ten years of industry experience. Mary had five years of foodservice experience and was formerly a customer service representative. Rick was the rookie on the team with three years of experience and had recently transferred from another foodservice company location in 2013, after entering the industry directly out of high school. Due to the nature of the business, the team shared responsibilities and was cross-trained in order to quickly move between job functions. Everyone worked the same shift, eight hours per day from 2:00 PM – 10:00 PM. The team had autonomy to create menus specific to the requirements of their building's population and was ultimately responsible for all business activities during the time they were scheduled. Jeff reported to the General Manager, Karen, who worked from 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM; the two spent only a few hours together each day. Karen, a trained chef with eleven years of foodservice experience, had been in her current role for a little over two years. Karen and Jeff were the only two employees who also had a formal sanitation certification, though all Cater-Fresh employees received some basic training.

Just an Ordinary Night

Since cafeteria locations were closed on weekends in most contract foodservice locations like this one, Mondays were essentially opening from scratch each week. Thus, most service-related errors at this site had historically occurred on Mondays, more than any other day of the week. So when Jeff, Mary, and Rick arrived for work on a seemingly normal Wednesday during the summer, the handoff from the day shift was uneventful, and no issues were reported; all three employees figured on smooth sailing for the duration of their shift. Inventory was on hand, all equipment was operational, and it happened to be Mary's work anniversary, so the team was in good spirits. The main menu item that night was prime rib, an item well received by the Fleet employees, and the Cater-Fresh team was looking forward to service as they had received accolades when serving this in the past.

Taking Shortcuts

At 6:30 PM, the café quickly filled with Fleet employees, with their interest and appetites focused on the prime rib. Steamed broccoli was offered as the only side item, prepared that way to align with the direction from Fleet's wellness committee. At 6:45 PM, Jeff served the last of the broccoli and called upon Rick to prepare more. The call for more inventory occurred late as Jeff had underestimated the demand for prime rib. The broccoli was ready in advance, lightly seasoned and placed on baking racks to enable quick response time, a process known as mise en place. Unfortunately, on this particular evening, only one tray of broccoli had been produced for the entire meal service. In his haste and under pressure, Rick took unwashed broccoli from the refrigerator, and without cleaning it, quickly cut it into florets and placed it into the steamer. Seconds seemed like hours while waiting for the process to end, and as the pressure for the product increased, Rick pulled the broccoli from the steamer before it had finished cooking. The product was rushed to the serving line and provided to the waiting customers, without any of the usual quality assurance protocols being followed.

High Five – We Killed the Line!

During peak business hours, working in kitchens was both thrilling and frightening. It was a business of hurry up and waits, particularly in a routine environment like Fleet. With up to 50 people in line, all with less than 30 minutes to return to work, the pressure was on to get them through the process quickly. Immediately after the last person in line was served, Jeff, Rick, and Mary were hand-slapping and celebrating the conclusion of another stressful event. In fact, the staff had coined the term "line busting" and kept a diary to record how quickly customers were served. It had become part of their culture and something they tracked and celebrated over the years. They recognized success when everyone was served within 10 minutes or less; a feat they achieved this night by a very slim margin. The team went on to finish their shift and closed out the day without any knowledge of the repercussions that were about to unfold.

Just Another Customer

Mike was a long term Fleet employee who worked the evening shift and occasionally used the cafeteria for meals. He had been frustrated with the lack of fresh offerings and the inconsistent variety provided by the cafeteria staff. He had surfaced concerns in the past but had felt that

no action had ever been taken to address them. Thus, his perception was that there had been no effort to change or improve and that the staff was indifferent to his concerns and requests. Additionally, Mike and other employees had made comments concerning the old and run-down appearance of their building's cafeteria compared to other cafeterias on property, choosing to place blame on poor upkeep by the cafeteria staff.

Mike was a vegetarian, and therefore, this Wednesday evening, he decided to order a plate of steamed broccoli as he was unable to find any other suitable options. Mike had to wait for his broccoli as the team ran out of inventory just as he arrived. By the time Mike received his steamed broccoli, he was already upset with the limited offerings and his wait for the one item he had to choose. Upon receiving and paying, Mike proceeded to the seating area and noticed that something was not right with his food. Looking closer, he saw small insects crawling out of and over his plate of broccoli. Mike did not attempt to discuss the issue with anyone on the Cater-Fresh team; rather he took photos of the food and spent the remainder of his break posting them on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and even Fleet's intranet sites.

Just a Couple of Posts: Mike's social media posts, though rather short and simple ("I can't believe they would serve me bugs – LOOK!", "So tired of the FILTHY & OLD cafeteria and INCOMPETENT staff", and "BUGS, they served me freaking BUGS!"), were edgy and quickly caught the attention of some of his fellow employees on their breaks throughout the rest of the night. Quite a few employees began liking, commenting, and sharing the posts throughout their breaks. Within an hour or so, day shift employees (the largest group of employees) and even some of their spouses and girlfriends/boyfriends, began to comment on the posts and pictures. By the time his shift was over a few hours later, the posts had been viewed and shared over 1,000 times by employees across Fleet on every work shift. There were so many shares and reposts (retweets) that caught the attention of some of the employee leaders that they began a petition to remove Cater-Fresh from across the campus; at the end of the day a formal petition was sitting on the desk of Fleet's CEO.

Clean Up on Aisle Five! What Just Happened?

Jeff's day got off to an early start Thursday morning when the phone rang at 7:00 AM. David, the Vice President for Cater-Fresh, awoke him with a furor of questions to understand what happened after speaking with Karen (GM), who was tipped off by an overnight employee with whom she was close. Jeff was stumped and could hardly believe what he was hearing. He had received no feedback from customers about an issue, yet as Karen and David had been finding out, there were pictures of bug-infested food from his cafeteria last night shared across the Fleet organization. Some employees had even begun printing and posting pictures on building entrances to illustrate the egregiousness of the incident. Comments and slanderous remarks were sent from numerous locations across the country and around the

world as the news reached many of Fleet's global offices throughout the entire organization. There were even rumors that the local news stations were considering picking up the story, but were sufficiently quelled by Fleet's community relations team throughout the day.

Cater-Fresh, who had only recently celebrated the retention of the Fleet account immediately discovered a new environment of hostility and potential contract termination. Calls went out for help, and a Cater-Fresh emergency response team of more than 40 professionals were assembled from all over the country. The team immediately went to work investigating the entire enterprise to identify the potential of a systemic issue. The review illustrated several key areas of concern: a lack of training and the prioritization of service speed being the focus opposed to safe food handling practices.

A Glimpse into the Aftermath

Comprehensive improvement plans were developed and deployed in all cafeterias. Employee training was completed over the course of several months on nights and weekends to avoid any business disruption. Employees, regardless of tenure, were all trained on safe food handling practices (using a national sanitation certification program) and were all required to complete fifty hours of additional food safety training per year ongoing. All locations were required to attain an internationally recognized ISO (International Standards Organization) certification for foodservice, a rigorous systems and review process that signifies process excellence and an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement. This involved comprehensive management training beyond the scope of the traditional work day, something all managers would complete in their free time. The response plan initially cost Cater-Fresh more than $100,000, with ongoing annual operational costs exceeding five times that amount. Perhaps most importantly was the untold damage to the Cater-Fresh brand. This impact continues to reveal itself over time as the company competes for new business while having this blemish on its brand.

Case Summary

The case presented the story of a foodservice incident that happened on what was assumed to be an ordinary Wednesday for Cater-Fresh employees at a cafeteria on the campus of Fleet Corporation. In the story were relevant facts focused on issues such as cafeteria food quality, service, and training, which when placed in this unique, modern setting became the catalyst for an immediate and overnight negative social media campaign. The Cater-Fresh staff did not follow proper techniques when handling and cooking the broccoli, which resulted in the food quality issue. Mike, a customer with a history of complaints against the contract foodservice provider in his workplace, took to multiple forms of social media, and with a manufactoring facility of over 10,000 associates, the news spiraled out of control almost immediately.

Key Questions

- What are the primary and secondary service failures that occurred throughout this case study that may have exacerbated the situation, causing Mike to respond in the way he did?
- How could Jeff, and the foodservice team as a whole, have caught the bug infested food before Mike? Why did this go unnoticed?
- Based on what you read in this case study, what does Cater-Fresh need to do to ensure this does not happen again?
- How could Jeff have better prepared his staff to respond to the broccoli shortage during service?
- What is an appropriate best practice for responding to negative social media incidents?
- How could a more engaging customer service approach have averted Mike from wanting to take a retaliatory response?
- How had Jeff and Karen failed to recognize and respond to the underlying customer concerns that led to Mike feeling the way he did? What could they have done differently?
- Do you think other concerns such as the feelings towards a poor environment contributed to the case issues? How could the team overcome an environment that has not been updated since the 1960's? Is this even possible?
- What is the best way to respond to Fleet's CEO to instill confidence that Cater-Fresh is still the best suited to operate the foodservice program, despite the recent incident?

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