

Off-Premise Catering Management

Off-premise catering is serving food at a location away from the caterer's food production facility. One example of a food production facility is a freestanding commissary, which is a kitchen facility used exclusively for the preparation of foods to be served at other locations. Other examples of production facilities include, but are not limited to, hotel, restaurant, and club kitchens. In most cases there is no existing kitchen facility at the location where the food is served.

Caterers provide single-event food service, but not all caterers are created equal. They generally fall into one of three categories:

Party food caterers supply only the food for an event. They drop off cold foods and leave any last-minute preparation, plus service and cleanup, to others.

Hot buffet caterers provide hot foods that are delivered from their commissaries in insulated containers. They sometimes provide serving personnel at an additional charge.

Full-service caterers not only provide food, but frequently cook it to order on-site. They also provide service personnel at the event, plus all the necessary food-related equipment china, glassware, flatware, tables and chairs, tents, and so forth. They can arrange for other services, like décor and music, as well. In short, a full-service caterer can plan an entire event, not just the food for it.

Off-premise catering can mean serving thousands of box lunches to a group of conventioners; barbecuing chicken and ribs for fans before a big college game, serving an elegant dinner for two aboard a luxury yacht, or providing food, staff, and equipment for an upscale fund raiser with hundreds of guests. On a "degree of difficulty" scale from one to ten one meaning "easy" and ten meaning "most challenging" on-premise catering is a two, and off-premise would rank a ten!

Off-premise caterers meet the needs of all market segments, from the low-budget customer who looks for the greatest quantity and quality for the least amount of money, to the upscale client with an unlimited budget who wants the highest level of service, the ultimate in food quality, and the finest in appointments crystal stem-ware, silver-plated flatware, and luxurious linens. Between these two extremes is the mid-scale market segment, which requires more quality than the low-budget sector, but less than the upscale.

Off-premise catering is an art and a science. The art is creating foods and moods, as the caterer and client together turn a vision into reality. The science is the business of measuring money, manpower, and material. Successful off-premise caterers recognize the importance of both aspects art and science and are able to work at both the creative and the financial levels.

In off-premise catering, there is only one chance to get it right. Many events, such as wedding receptions, occur only once in a lifetime. Other events are scheduled annually, quarterly, or on a regular basis, and the caterer who fails to execute all details of such an event to the satisfaction of the client will seldom have another chance.

Unfortunately for some, off-premise catering can be like living on the brink of disaster unless they are experienced. Uninitiated amateurs may not recognize a volatile situation until it becomes a problem, later realizing they should have recognized it earlier.

Catering off-premise is very similar to a sports team playing all of its games away from home, in unfamiliar surroundings, with none of the comforts of home to ease the way. There is no home field advantage, but there is a minefield disadvantage!

As caterers plod their way toward the completion of a catered event, there are thousands of potential "land mines" that can ruin an otherwise successful affair.

Some examples follow:

1. Already running late for a catering delivery, the catering van driver discovers that all vehicle traffic around the party site is in gridlock. The traffic has been at a standstill for more than an hour, the police say it will be hours before the congestion can be eliminated, and the clients and their guests are anxiously awaiting dinner.
2. The only freight elevator in a high-rise office building has been commandeered for the evening by moving and cleaning people, thus preventing access to the floor where a caterer is to stage an event scheduled to start in two hours.
3. The wrong hot food truck is dispatched to a wedding reception. The error is not discovered until the truck has reached the reception and the bride and groom are ready for their guests to be served. It will take more than an hour to send the correct truck with the food that was ordered.
4. A cook wheels a container filled with cooked prime ribs down a pier toward a yacht where the meat will be served to a group of 80 conventioners in half an hour. Suddenly, the cook is distracted, and the prime rib container tumbles over the edge of the pier into 40 feet of water.

5. The table numbers have vanished, and the guests are ready to be seated for dinner.
6. The fire marshal arrives at a party site 20 minutes before a catered event and refuses to allow guests access to the party site because the space had not been authorized for party use.
7. The catering crew arrives at the party site with a van full of food, cooked to order exactly one week early.
8. A new customer places an order and asks that the caterer deliver to a home where family members and guests will have gathered prior to a funeral service. The caterer sends the food and, upon arrival, is told that the person with the check-book is at the funeral home and is asked to please stop back in an hour for the money. The delivery person leaves without obtaining a signature. Upon returning, there is no one home and no one from whom to collect payment.
9. While using a garbage disposal in a client's home, the caterer suddenly hears a terrible noise and watches in horror as water and garbage spew from the disposal all over the floor. The irate customer refuses to pay the caterer and threatens to sue for the cost of replacing the garbage disposal that was ruined because of (in the customer's words) the caterer's "negligence."
10. After catering a flawless party at a client's home and loading the catering truck to capacity, the caterer is shocked to learn from the client that all 15 bags of trash must be removed from the client's property because of the neighborhood's zoning ordinances.
11. The caterer's rental company representative calls the caterer the morning after an event and advises the caterer that the \$600 rented chafing dish is missing. It was there the night before, when the caterer left the client's home. Get the picture?

We could tell horror stories all day! Seasoned off-premise caterers agree, these are only a few of the thousands of obstacles that stand in the way of completing a catered event.

Comparing Off-Premise and On-Premise Catering

What are the differences between off-premise catering and on-premise catering? Let's examine these differences, from both the client's and the caterer's viewpoints.

From the Client's Viewpoint

Most clients fail to consider the cost of the rental equipment such as tables, chairs, linens, china, glassware, and flatware when they consider engaging an off-premise caterer. They think it will be less expensive to entertain in their homes, or at unique off-premise sites, than in hotels. In fact, it can be more expensive, considering not only the cost of the rental equipment, but also other costs such as transportation of food and supplies to the site, the costs of special labor and décor, the need for tenting, air-conditioning and/or heating, and other expenses. Clients may save some money by buying their own liquor, but this can be insignificant as compared with the added costs. For many clients, the additional costs are far outweighed by the benefits of entertaining in the privacy of their own homes or the uniqueness of a special off-premise location such as a museum, state-of-the-art aquarium, antique car dealership, or historical site.

From the Caterer's Viewpoint

Off-premise caterers must plan menus that can be prepared successfully at the client's location. For example, foods to be fried should not be cooked in unventilated spaces, like small kitchens in high-rise office buildings. On-premise caterers are not as limited in this regard, and they are generally supported by built-in equipment that can support a wider variety of menus. On-premise party personnel are more familiar with the party facilities than those who work at a variety of unfamiliar locations. Off-premise catering generally has greater seasonal and day-to-day swings in personnel needs, which can create a greater challenge for the off-premise caterer, who is constantly recruiting and training staff; turnover is usually high because such work is on an "as-needed basis." There is definitely a greater potential for oversights in off-premise catering. Backup supplies, food, and equipment can be miles away or even inaccessible when catering, for instance, aboard a yacht miles from shore. In spite of the uncertainties, off-premise catering offers the opportunity to work in a greater variety of interesting locations. The work is more likely to be different each day, resulting in less boredom and more excitement. For those looking for un-limited challenges and rewards, off-premise catering may be the answer.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Off-Premise Catering

Advantages:

✍	Advance deposits	✍	Limited start-up investment
✍	Limited inventories	✍	Controllable costs
✍	Additional revenues	✍	Business by contract
✍	Direct payment	✍	Advance forecasting
✍	Free word-of-mouth advertising	✍	Selectivity

Let's discuss a few of these items in more detail. First, most off-premise caterers require some form of advance deposit prior to an event. This deposit provides the caterer with some security if the event is canceled and also can be used to purchase some or all of the food and supplies for the party. There is no need for large amounts of capital to get started, since most off-premise catering operations begin by using the existing kitchen facilities of a restaurant, club, hotel, church, or other licensed food service business. (It is common knowledge that many start their catering businesses in their home kitchens, but it is imperative to state that this is in direct violation of most local zoning ordinances.)

In addition, all of the necessary catering food service equipment such as china, glass-ware, flatware, tables, chairs, and linens can usually be rented, thus avoiding having to invest in expensive equipment inventories. Food and supply inventories, as well as operating costs, are much more easily controlled, because clients must advise the caterer in advance as to the number of guests that are expected. Off-premise caterers need buy only the amounts necessary to serve the event, unlike a restaurant where there is a large variation from day to day regarding the number of patrons and their menu selections. Off-premise catering generates additional revenues for existing operations like hotels, clubs, and restaurants. They can generate even more profit by providing other services rental equipment, flowers, décor, music, entertainment, and other accessory services.

Both the client and the caterer have expectations regarding the outcome of the party. These expectations should be clearly spelled out in a written contract. Payment for an event is normally made directly to a manager or owner, eliminating a middleman, whether it's a wedding planner, on-site food and beverage director, or one of the caterer's own staff members. This form of direct payment provides for better cash control and fewer folks to share the profit.

Advance forecasting is more accurate for off-premise caterers, because parties are generally booked weeks, months, or years in advance. Moreover, each part of the country has seasonal swings, which make revenue forecasting somewhat easier. For example, in the South the summer months are generally less busy, but in the North these are the busy months. Off-premise events generate tremendous amounts of free word-of-mouth advertising, which can produce future business without the necessity of advertising.

Many off-premise caterers feel that satisfied guests at one party will either directly or indirectly book another party by speaking favorably to friends and co-workers about the event and the caterer. In other words, one party can create future parties. Caterers also have the advantage of being somewhat selective about their clients. There are no laws that require you to accept every request to cater. If the job doesn't meet your standards, politely decline. In sticky situations where you've already begun to work with a client but find that your communication styles just don't mesh or, as sometimes happens with weddings, the client is not heeding your advice and you can't even decide who's really in charge you can walk away, as long as you do so within the terms of your written agreement.

Off-premise catering does have some disadvantages too: Catering managers, owners, and staff undergo periods of high stress during very busy periods. Deadlines must be met. There are no excuses for missing a catering deadline. Stress is compounded because the workload is not evenly spread throughout the year. For most off-premise caterers, 80 percent of the events are scheduled in 20 percent of the time. For most, weekends are generally busier than weekdays. Certain seasons, including Christmas, are normally busier than others. Of course, caterers must maintain general business hours too!

Many have left the catering field, burned out by the constant stress and high energy demands. The seasonality of the business makes it difficult to find staff at certain times. Revenues are inconsistent, making cash management very difficult, particularly during the slower periods when expenses continue yet revenues do not. For those caterers who operate hotels, restaurants, clubs, and other businesses, the time away from the main business spent on the off-premise business can hurt. It is difficult for even the most well-organized person to be in two places at the same time. Many hoteliers and restaurateurs find the rigors of off-premise catering too great. Some quit after realizing the difficulty of catering away from their operations. They feel that the financial benefits are insufficient compared with the effort required to cater off-premise events.

Elements of Successful Off-Premise Catering

What does it take to become a successful off-premise caterer? What experience is necessary, and what personality traits are desirable?

Work Experience: Prior experience in the catering profession or the food service industry is important. Experience in food preparation and food service (both back-of-the-house and front-of-the-house) helps caterers understand the procedures and problems in both areas and how the two areas interface. Those with a strong kitchen background, for example, would be wise to gain some front-of-house experience, and front-of-house personnel should learn the kitchen routine. Many successful off-premise caterers began by working as accommodators. Accommodators are private chefs who are hired to prepare food for parties. Many assist the client with planning the menu, purchasing the food, and even arranging for kitchen and service staff. The food is prepared and served in the client's home or facility, eliminating the need for a catering commissary. Accommodators receive a fee for their services. The party staff is paid directly by the client.

Passion: Successful professionals are passionate about their work, and caterers are no exception. They love what they do! Clients and staff members will quickly detect a lack of passion, and it will cost you business and good workers. If you don't love what you do, move on and try something else.

An Entrepreneurial Nature: The desire to be an entrepreneur is a trait that is highly desirable for off-premise caterers. An entrepreneur must be willing to spend extraordinary amounts of time and energy to make the off-premise catering business successful, possess an inherent sense of what is right for the business, have the ability to view all aspects of the business at once rather than focusing only on one or two parts, and demonstrate a strong, incessant desire to be his or her own boss and become financially independent.

Basic Business Knowledge: Accounting and bookkeeping skills are necessary to understand the financial aspects of operating a catering business. The ability to prepare and interpret financial statements is essential. Learn as much about computers as you can. You'll be amazed at how much you can accomplish by using e-mail, having a website, and using specialized programs for everything from budgeting to menu planning. It's also important to understand the legal aspects of catering. Laws that affect caterers include regulation of licensing, contracts, liability, labor, and alcoholic beverage service.

A caterer, like any other businessperson, must have some human resource skills. Knowing how to recruit, train, motivate, and manage personnel is critical. Off-premise caterers should be knowledgeable about how to develop and implement a marketing plan.

Ability to Plan, Organize, Execute, and Control: These are the four basic functions of management. To plan, a caterer must visualize in advance all of the aspects of a catered event and document the plans so they are readily understood by the client and easily executed by the staff. Organizing is simply breaking down the party plans into groups of functions that can be executed in an efficient manner. Execution is the implementation of the organized plans by the party staff. Controlling is the supervisory aspect of the event. All well-organized and well-executed plans require control and supervision. The adage is, "It is not what you expect, but what you inspect." The premier off-premise catering firms in the United States insist on excellent supervision at each event. Ability to Communicate with Clients and Staff. Listening is the key to good communication with clients and prospective clients. Off-premise caterers must listen carefully and attentively to determine what the client needs. A client who calls and asks, "Are you able to cater a party next Friday?" should be dealt with differently from one who calls and asks, "How much will it cost for a wedding reception?" The first caller is ready to buy your services, whereas the second caller is shopping. Astute caterers must be able to respond to client requests in such a manner that the client will immediately gain confidence in the caterer. Communicating with staff is a complex issue. In simple terms, it can be reduced to the ability to tell staff what is expected so that they understand, and the ability to receive their feedback regarding problems, both actual and potential. The result of effective communication is an off-premise catering staff that professionally executes a well-planned party that meets or exceeds the client's expectations.

Willingness to Take Calculated Risks: Off-premise catering is a very risky business. It is not for the fainthearted who are afraid of the unknown. For example, it is more risky catering a corporate fund-raiser at the local zoo under a tent than serving the same group in a hotel ballroom. Off-premise caterers must know when the risk outweighs the gain. In this particular example, catering the event at the zoo without adequate cover in case of rain would probably be too risky. The event could be ruined. The tent makes the risk of rain a calculated one.

Sound Body and Mind: Off-premise catering requires working long hours without rest or sleep, lifting and moving heavy objects, intense pressure as deadlines near, and even long periods of little or no business, which can cause concern. Successful caterers should be in good physical shape, have a high energy level, and be able to mentally deal with seasonal business cycles that range from nonstop activity to slow periods with little or no business. Off-premise caterers must be self-confident, but at the same time realize that they must always find ways to improve the quality of their food and services. In this profession a fondness for people and feeling comfortable in

crowds is important. A “cool head” when under pressure will keep both staff and client calm while potential problems are resolved professionally and efficiently.

Creativity: This is the benchmark of all outstanding caterers. Creative caterers are able to turn a client's vision into reality by creating the appropriate look, feel, menu, service, and ambiance. Those who are not very creative can learn to be, or they can employ those who are creative.

Dependability: Dependability is a major cornerstone of success in off-premise catering. When a caterer fails to deliver what was promised, the negative word of mouth travels fast among clients and potential clients. Even in those situations where circumstances change, making it more difficult to perform as promised, the out-standing caterer will find a way to deliver rather than use the changed circumstances as an excuse not to deliver.

Open-Mindedness: Open-minded caterers read up on catering trends and try new recipes and menus. They are willing to prepare unfamiliar dishes requested by clients, after thoroughly testing and understanding the recipes. They discover and try new dishes. They are always learning better ways to run their businesses.

Ability to Meet the Needs of Clients: The needs of the client must always come first. Success in this business comes from identifying these needs and satisfying them. Unsuccessful off-premise caterers are those who get lost in trying to satisfy their own needs for money, equipment, and greater self-esteem. They forget that the primary goal is to serve the needs of the client. When a client's needs are met, the caterer's needs for revenues, profits, and positive feedback will automatically be met.

Ability to Project a Favorable Image: Prospective clients hire caterers based on their perceived image of the caterer and what the caterer will provide. In some sense, then, caterers are selling themselves more than their food. Off-premise caterers must be able to project a favorable image to the client, one that is in accord with the client's expectations. For example, a caterer whose image is sophisticated and up-scale will be hard-pressed to sell a Little League banquet with a low budget. Successful caterers understand their projected images and target their marketing efforts at those clients who desire that image.

Sense of Humor: In this pressure-packed, deadline-oriented, and stressful business, it is easy to get carried away with the magnitude of the undertakings and become so tense and uptight that work ceases to be fun. Laughter at the right time can relieve that tension and stress, putting a renewed sense of fun into the work at hand.

Managing an Off-Premise Catering Operation

Even those who possess the qualities that indicate off-premise catering success must know how to put these talents to use effectively. Off-premise caterers should be hands-on managers who are constantly customer focused. They must be able to lead staff and clients alike, while conducting business in a professional manner. They must be able to make timely, ethical decisions, while understanding what makes for a successful event. They must also avoid those situations that cause a business to fail. Developing a Strategic Plan Yogi Berra, the zany former New York Yankee catcher, is famous for his many witticisms, such as, “Nobody goes there any more it's too crowded.” But his best quote may be this one: “If you don't know where you're going, you will wind up some-where else.” That's the reason you need a strategic plan a roadmap to help you determine the direction in which you wish to go, and the specific goals you'll need to accomplish to get there. A strategic plan starts with a statement of core values, which may include things like client satisfaction; ethical business practices; staff satisfaction, training, and motivation; community service; and operating an environmentally conscious business.

From these core values, a caterer can develop a Mission Statement a succinct sentence that sums up the company's mission. Here's an example:

1. “To meet the catering needs of the corporate community, providing high levels of service and food quality that result in repeat business and vital growth.” After the Mission Statement comes the Vision Statement a concise summary of where you want to be in the future. Again, an example:

2. “Within five years, our company will be the top-ranked catering firm in our area, with continuing sales and profit growth, while giving back to our community.”

It's not enough to brainstorm about these statements. Writing them down is the first step to making a commitment to make them a reality. Only after they are put in writing can you develop more specific objectives to increase sales and profits, measure customer satisfaction, size up your competitors, and plan the ways in which you will give back to the community.

Your Mission and Vision Statements lead naturally to the next step to establish goals for the operation. You may have heard time management experts use the term “SMART” when describing goals. The acronym stands for:

Specific: The goals to be accomplished must be easily understood, concise, and unambiguous.

Measurable: There should be no question about whether one attains, or falls short of, a goal. It may be measured in terms of quality, cost, quantity, or time.

Attainable: The goals may be just out of reach, but they're not out of sight! The best goal challenges and

motivates you and your team. If it's practically impossible, it may be too frustrating.

Relevant: The goals must fit well with your long-term mission and vision, your objectives, and the results you expect.

Time-bound: There must be a specific deadline for completion of each goal.

An example of a SMART goal might be to increase sales and profits by 20 percent each year for the next five years. Once a caterer has set goals, there must be certain trade-offs. To increase sales, for instance, may require raising prices, hiring more staff to be able to cater more events, or spending money on advertising. The major goals can be broken into smaller, intermediate steps, with a time line to keep the company on track. And remember, goals are not just for the owner of a company. The staff and other professionals employed by the company tax preparer, banker, attorney should also be well aware of the goals. You'll need their help to achieve them, and you want them on your side, committed to your goals. Too often, caterers believe they can do every-thing themselves. They fail to ask for or accept advice from outside consultants and colleagues. It is far more intelligent to ask for assistance when you need it. Someone familiar with your plans and your passion for them is far more likely to be helpful.

Finally, as soon as a goal is set, take some action on it. The last part of a strategic management process is to reevaluate your mission, vision, and goals periodically. Times change, trends change, and you become aware of new information. Let's say a caterer's sales year showed a 50 percent increase, when he or she had set a 20 percent annual goal. In this case, the next year's goal might be more realistically revised to a 30 percent increase.

Hands-on Attention to Detail Management

The devil is in the details. Have you ever heard that old saying? Another way to put it: We've all been bitten by a mosquito or stung by a bee, but how many of us have been bitten by an elephant? It's always the little things that get us! In catering, the details are virtually endless, a stream of tiny elements that might go wrong and result in a catastrophe. One thing forgotten, misheard, or misplaced can ruin an event. So it's important to check and recheck and to be prepared for last-minute emergencies. It is simply not possible to run this kind of business from behind a desk, reading

computer printouts and delegating all tasks. Off-premise catering companies must be managed from the center of the action, whether that is with the guests or preparing foods in the kitchen. It comes from checking and rechecking every detail to ensure that it meets the highest of standards. It comes from inspecting for the best and expecting the best. Some call this management style "management by walking around."

In one sense that is true, but there is more to it than walking around. Astute off-premise caterers must: Obtain feedback from clients and guests regarding the food and service. Oversee the catering staff to ensure they are performing as directed and as expected. Help out when a table needs to be cleared or when the bar suddenly becomes very busy. Help in the kitchen during critical times such as hot food dish-up, and even help scrape, stack, and wash dirty dishes if that's what is necessary. It's a roll-up-your-sleeves kind of profession, and you should never be totally satisfied with the way things are. Always look for new ways to present food and make it more flavorful, and for better and more efficient ways to do things.

Customer-Focused Management

An off-premise caterer's full-time mission must be to satisfy the needs of clients. They do not have as goals, increasing sales by a certain percentage, raising a profit margin, or reducing debt. They believe . . . that if you strive to sell only the highest quality product and strive to please every customer, sales, profit and success will follow. This is a difficult concept for many of us to grasp

The moral is simple: If you satisfy your customers while charging a fair price and controlling costs, profits will follow.

Managerial Decision Making

Off-premise catering managers must make decisions that keep their operations running smoothly. They realize that some decisions will be better than others, that there is no perfect solution to every problem, and that the best decision-making goal is to find the best possible solution with the least number of drawbacks. Take the initiative by anticipating and solving business problems." Remember that there's seldom only one acceptable solution to the problem.

1. Choose the best alternative.
2. Make decisions that help achieve the company objectives.
3. You need to consider feelings whenever people are involved. Even if you must make an unpopular decision, you can minimize repercussions . . . if workers know you have taken their feelings into account.
4. Allow quality time for planning and decision making . . . pick a time when you are energetic and your mind is fresh.
5. Realize that you'll never please everyone. Few decisions meet with unanimous approval . . . the appointed authority, not the majority, rules.
6. Make time for making decisions . . . in business, delaying a decision can cost thousands of dollars.

7. Put decision making in perspective. Every executive feels overwhelmed at times by either the enormity or the number of decisions made during a business day. . . .
8. For peace of mind accept that you are doing the best job you can with the time, talent, and resources you have.
9. Don't wait for a popular vote. Rallying your colleagues around your decision before you take action or waiting for their vote of confidence before deciding any-thing may cost too much in time. There are times when you just have to do something.
10. Leadership - There are major differences between those who lead and those who manage. Catering companies need both types of executives, and some who can do both. If a catering company is earning seven- and eight-figure annual revenues, it is most definitely being led by people with leadership skills. Leaders are able to get people to do things they don't necessarily like to do, but they do them and even enjoy them. You might say:

A MANAGER ... A LEADER ...

Maintains Develops

Administers Innovates

Relies on systems Relies on people

Counts on controls Counts on trust

Does things right Does the right things

Works within the system Works on the system

Manages things Leads people

A leader is more like a thermostat than a thermometer. A thermostat sets the standard temperature for the space it's in. A thermometer simply records the temperature; it can't change anything. And one more important trait: Leaders take a little more than their share of the blame and a little less than their share of the credit.

Professionalism and Common Business Courtesy Off-premise caterers who are not professional in their business practices will never reach the pinnacle of success in the field. Before we address the technical aspects of catering in the succeeding chapters, it is of utmost importance that we define professionalism.

- ✍ Give price quotes and commitments only when you know everything about the event.
- ✍ Treat clients and staff members with respect.
- ✍ Build relationships with clients. Do not look at them as accounts or projects.
- ✍ Be on time, or a bit early, for appointments. Be prepared for an appointment.
- ✍ Be honest; don't play games.
- ✍ Stand behind your work. If it is wrong, make it right.
- ✍ In the face of abuse from others, don't respond by becoming abusive. Try to detach yourself from it emotionally and handle it logically. Of course, do not use your position of power to abuse others.
- ✍ Dress professionally.
- ✍ Enjoy your work as an off-premise caterer. When work ceases to be enjoyable, it is time to quit and find a new career.

Ethics in Management

The Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus said, "A good reputation is more valuable than money." This is as true today as it was in ancient times. And yet, lack of ethics is perhaps the most widely discussed topic in today's business world. We read and hear of illegalities, scandals, and other forms of questionable behavior bringing down some of the nation's largest corporations. Off-premise caterers are in no way exempt from ethical concerns. Even the smallest caterers deal in issues of fairness, legal requirements, and honesty on a daily basis. Examples include truth in menu, misleading advertising, unexpected and unjustified last-minute add-ons to the party price, and even underbidding a competitor when the client has disclosed your competitor's price.

The truly ethical caterer will assume responsibility for the host to ensure that the host plans an event in the best interest of the guests. A host who wishes to serve alcohol to underage guests or barbecued ribs to a group of elderly people (tough to eat with dentures) is out of line and needs to be advised that this will not work. In fact, an ethical caterer will refuse to cater an event that is clearly not being planned in the best interest of the host or guests.

There are times when a caterer is given a free hand in planning a menu. Perhaps a grieving client calls for food after the funeral of a loved one, saying, "Please send over food for 50 guests tomorrow night. You know what we like!" The ethical caterer will not take advantage of this situation by either providing too much food or overcharging the client.

Another temptation arises when the caterer is pressed to cater more events on a certain day or evening than he or she can reasonably accommodate. The extra money looks good. Unethical caterers will rationalize that they can handle all the events, even if an inexperienced supervisor or staff must oversee these events, or even if the kitchen staff will not be able to prepare the caterer's usual high-quality food because of lack of time and personnel. Caterers who take on more work than

they can reasonably accommodate are greedy and are considered by many observers to be unethical. In the foregoing situation the caterer should decline the work and perhaps recommend another caterer. Some caterers refuse to recommend another catering firm because they feel that if the client is not pleased with the other firm, the caterer who turned down the business will be blamed for the recommendation. Other caterers freely recommend one or more companies when unable to cater events.

There are times when it is very hard not to bad-mouth a competitor, but this is considered unethical as well as rude. Those who are ethical would rather point out their own strengths than downgrade the competition.

It can be very tempting for self-employed caterers to under report income or overstate expenses. They rationalize that no one will know if they accept cash for a party, then fail to report it as income and pay the associated tax, or that no one will know if they happen to charge personal expenses now and then to the business. Some caterers who are licensed to sell liquor by the drink or by the bottle are tempted to bill clients for beverages that were not consumed. These practices are not only unethical they are illegal.

Other ethical violations occur when caterers receive under-the-table cash “kick-backs” from suppliers, misrepresent their services to potential clients, or bid on party plans or ideas stolen from other caterers. Caterers also soon learn that some clients are unethical. A few are masterful at finding fault with a wedding or other important event, then demanding a “discount” based on whatever flaw they feel they have uncovered. Some will refuse to pay for linens that were damaged by candles they lit on them! You'll find people who, mid-party, will ask you to stay “a couple hours of overtime, just to wrap things up” then not show up to pay you for the extra time the next day, as agreed. Others will haggle over the tiniest details on an invoice or try to engage more than one caterer in a bidding war to lower prices. Caterers who deal with “middleman” organizations, like destination management firms or production companies, may find that a client of one of these companies will come back later to try to deal directly with you, thus cutting out the middleman who recommended you!

As a catering professional, you need to expect a certain amount of this behavior and must protect yourself if you suspect an ethical question may arise. Insisting on security deposits, having a valid and authorized credit card number on file for unforeseen charges, refusing to look at other caterers' written bids, and standing firm on your own invoice prices are just a few ways ethical problems can be avoided. And rather than cut out a legitimate middleman-type of vendor, you can either re-fuse to deal directly with a client who tries such a maneuver or suggest a commission be paid to the middleman.

You will also be put in some sticky situations as during tough times, and even good times certain clients will make unrealistic requests. They've often been good, regular clients too! But they'll promise you future business if you'll cater their party “at cost,” or defer payment for them, or ask some other special favor “just this once.” These requests are unfair, and you're right to be squeamish about them. Off-premise caterers should be extremely wary when approached in this fashion. As a general rule, clients who do not pay their bills in a professional manner, or who are not willing to pay a fair price for catering services, are not worth the headaches they cause.

Separating Yourself from the Competition

Great caterers do more than imitate they innovate. There are distinct advantages for those who offer a unique menu, a unique service, or perhaps a unique location. They may build and improve on someone else's concept, but they strive to take the idea to the next level. Rather than mimicking another's success, they imprint their own signature on their menus. To illustrate, let's take a look at two simple, self-service mashed potato bars:

THE TYPICAL APPROACH

Mashed potatoes
Sour cream
Bacon bits
Chopped chives
Shredded cheddar cheese

THE UNIQUE APPROACH

Sweet potatoes
Crème fraîche
Canadian bacon
Chopped fresh basil
Crumbled Stilton

The “Unique” bar may include all the traditional accompaniments too but what a difference a little imagination makes! There might even be a bit of caviar to top the mashers at the Unique bar, and perhaps they'll be served in martini glasses. Why not have fun with it?

Similarly, as with any career, catering professionals need to reexamine their business strategies from time to time. Some caterers do what they do best, are well known for it, and never vary their formulas. Their clients love them and get exactly what they expect.

Other caterers blindly copy everybody else. They ricochet from one recipe to the other, never bothering to see if it meets their clients' needs.

Great caterers also separate themselves from competitors by using the resources around them to build their businesses. In South Florida, for example, one caterer specializes in event planning for doctors, through his hospital food service management job. Another has an exclusive off-premise contract for a sports facility; a third was the on-

premise caterer for a city club, which resulted in off-premise jobs for the club members. Capitalize on the audience you have they're (almost) already yours!

Personal Management

Off-premise caterers must learn how to deal with principles of stress management, time management, and personal organization if they are to manage at peak efficiency. Time is our most precious commodity, and to waste it because of being over stressed or disorganized will inevitably result in less-than-desirable results.

Stress Management

Stress comes from interaction with others, and from having to meet deadlines. A certain amount of stress and tension is necessary to achieve the best results those who are too laid back generally do not maximize their potential but too much stress causes chronic fatigue, irritability, cynicism, hostility, inflexibility, and difficulty in thinking clearly. Catering managers who are over stressed are unable to perform at maximum capability.

Stress can often be controlled through:

Daily exercise such as brisk walking, running, or other aerobic pursuits that increase the pulse rate. Some folks purposefully take their minds off work when they exercise; for others, the daily walk or run is a time to get their day mentally organized. Relaxation techniques, including meditation and yoga.

Time Management

There are only 168 hours in each week, and the greatest rewards come to those who accomplish the most meaningful things during this fixed amount of time. Off-premise caterers realize that if they can accomplish more meaningful production in less time, they will have more time for things other than work. They also realize that working smarter, not harder, through the effective use of time will produce greater results. The key to effective time management is to set goals for a lifetime, for five years, and for each year, month, week, and day. (Use some of the tips for putting SMART goals in writing not just for “big picture” goals, but as part of your daily business.) Without written goals, off-premise caterers cannot effectively manage their time. Because time management involves choosing how to spend time, it is impossible to make proper choices without knowing your desired goals. The captain of a ship with-out a destination cannot choose the proper course. He will cruise aimlessly at sea, never reaching his port of call.

It is equally important to schedule “downtime” for yourself for family, friends, hobbies, and interests other than work. You are guarding against burnout when you insist on some personal time. Off-premise caterers can choose from an array of time-saving techniques and technical advances to help them in the quest to efficiently manage time:

- ✍ Make those daily, detailed lists of goals and objectives.
- ✍ Use technical advances to speed up paper handling, such as fax machines and computers with word processing, accounting, and menu-planning software.
- ✍ For heaven's sake, if you don't have a computer, get one! You can purchase one nowadays for a monthly payment of less than \$40. You can take classes to learn how to use it or hire someone to teach you individually.
- ✍ Use cellular phones to stay in touch while away from the office. These are life-savers at off-premise catering locations when emergency and other calls are necessary, and if you have downtime, a cellular phone can make it easy for you to use this time to return phone calls.
- ✍ Handle incoming papers only once. Here's the rule: Do it, delegate it, discard it, or file it. (Better yet, hire someone else to file it!)
- ✍ Do your most important work at times when you happen to be most alert. Most of us know whether we are “morning people” or “night owls.” Take advantage of your peak energy periods to handle your most challenging tasks.
- ✍ Sign up for a seminar or course in time management to learn more tips.

One of the biggest time wasters for a caterer is also the source of much business the prospective client who calls to ask questions so it's an interruption that cannot be ignored, but can be controlled. Whoever answers the phone at your business should always qualify the incoming call by asking:

- The date of the event
- The location of the event
- The number of guests
- The budget for the event

Why?

First of all, time can be wasted talking about an event before you ask the date and discover you're not able to do it in the first place because of a scheduling conflict. Perhaps the number of guests is too small or too large for your particular company, the budget is insufficient, or the proposed location is already booked for another event. Always focus on results by asking yourself, "Will this activity help me achieve any of my goals?" Prioritize tasks in order of their importance and know when to delegate them to others. Most people waste countless hours, days, weeks, and years chitchatting on the phone, shuffling papers, running errands, and doing other things that are easy enough but offer little or no payoff. Learn to delegate these types of tasks whenever possible. Pay other people to do them, and don't tell yourself you can't afford it you can always make more money, but you have only so much time. The true achievers in catering and in other fields minimize their time on low-priority, low-payoff tasks and turn their attention to those things that will bring the greatest rewards.

These tasks are often difficult to accomplish, take a great deal of time, and involve at least some risk. For example, a caterer could spend the entire day showing prospective clients numerous suitable locations for a major event. The caterer would then spend the next three days preparing a written proposal for an event at each of the locations, with no guarantee that the event will even take place. However, if the caterer is hired, there's a five-figure profit to be made. Worth the risk? Certainly! Another high-payoff task might be to write a new catering menu. Both this and the aforementioned task require large chunks of time and involve some risk, but more than likely will produce major rewards in increased revenues and profits. In summary, off-premise caterers who best manage their time in the long run will be the most successful. They become the leading caterers in their communities, in their states, and in the country.

Getting Organized

When projects, tasks, catering kitchens, and offices are organized, things run much more smoothly and efficiently. The time spent looking for things and jumping from job to job is wasted time that could be put to much better use. Many off-premise caterers have found various methods that work for them: Establish a filing system using hanging folders and manila folders. Categories can include upcoming events, projects to do, and projects pending. Files should be stored vertically, rather than stacked atop one another, for greater accessibility. Take a tip from event planners who start a separate notebook for each event they are working on. Into this three-ring binder go all notes, contracts, sketches, color samples anything for that particular job.

Consider hiring a professional organizer to come to your office and set up a filing and record-keeping system that works for your business. Keep those items that are used frequently close by. Focus on one project at a time, rather than jumping from one thing to another. This can be easily accomplished by blocking out some time during the day to work on major projects and arranging for no interruptions. Whenever possible, try to schedule time to return phone calls and/or e-mail messages. That way, you can handle them all at once, instead of scattering them (and your thoughts) in five-minute intervals throughout the day. Either at the end of each day or first thing in the morning, prepare a list of things to do for the day.

Summary of Personal Management

Those off-premise caterers who can effectively deal with stress, who properly manage their time, who learn to delegate and keep things organized will lead their peers into the future. They will set the standards for others to follow. They will accomplish more and will be in a position to receive the greatest rewards as a result.

The Seven Habits of Highly Successful Caterers

Willingness to Take Calculated Risks

One of our favorite sayings is, "A turtle goes nowhere until it sticks its neck out." In order to succeed, we must be continually growing and improving, and the only way to do this is to leave our comfort zones and stick our necks out! If you're right-handed, you feel quite comfortable writing with your right hand. Try writing with your left hand. You're definitely out of your comfort zone. But after a while, you'll find you can actually write with either hand. Successful caterers make things happen by taking calculated risks, whether it is trying new menu items, new buffet display concepts, or accepting a job in a new and challenging off-premise location. Caterers who refuse to take risks fail to grow and learn are left behind.

Sincere Concern for Others

Nobody cares how much you *know* until they know how much you *care*. Empathy and genuine concern for your clients and staff are paramount to long-term success. What are their needs, wishes, and desires? What are their concerns and their "hot buttons"? By putting ourselves in their positions, we can begin to show concern for others

and understand them. When we do this, we develop meaningful relationships and, not coincidentally, loyalty. We give them what they want, and we get what we want.

Keeping Up with Current Trends

It's not just a matter of food and presentation and theme trends. Caterers who are not wired to do business online through the Internet and e-mail are missing out on huge opportunities. The online catering referral service, Leading Caterers of America (founded by the book's co-author Bill Hansen), receives 5 to 20 inquiries per day from clients looking for catering services coast to coast, in Alaska, Hawaii, and occasionally overseas. People do shop for catering online, and the companies that lead the way have high-quality website and diligently reply to e-mailed requests in a timely manner. Caterers need to get in the habit of responding to e-mail correspondence as soon as possible, as well as providing e-mailed proposals to those clients who prefer to do business via their computers. Event planners who book caterers for their clients love receiving e-mailed proposals, because they are easy to copy-and-paste into their own proposals. If you're not in the habit of working online, you're behind the times.

Excellent Priorities and Time Management

You get 20 percent of your sales and profits from 80 percent of your clients, and 80 percent of your sales and profits from 20 percent of your clients. None of us ever go home at night thinking that all the work is done it never is. It's simply a question of what's most important, as well as what's most urgent. Urgent things are never really an issue. There's no question that if you have a catered event today, it will get done. But what's most urgent is not necessarily what's most important. You must understand the difference. For example, you could spend a day catering three small parties for 25 guests each, but fall behind on preparing a proposal for another job, in three months, for 500 guests and lose it to a competitor whose proposal was simply submitted on time. Successful caterers spend their time in those areas that generate the biggest pay-backs in terms of money, quality, and other rewards. They make a habit of planning their days, leaving time for the most important, as well as the most urgent. At the start of each day they prepare an agenda that details both short-term objectives and long-term goals. If you're a student, you should already be using this technique to accomplish as much as you can in school.

Quality before Quantity

Bigger is not necessarily better. Still, many of us get caught up in that way of thinking. If our sales are \$1 million, let's go for \$2 million. If they're \$2 million, what's wrong with \$4 million? And if \$4 million is good . . . There's nothing wrong with building sales if quality does not suffer. However, when the quality of our products and services suffers so does the quality of our lifestyle. More business means more hours at work. And doctors will tell you they've never met a man or woman who, on a deathbed, expressed a wish that he or she had spent more time at work. If we can grow our businesses with no adverse effects on the quality of our lives or our products, then we should go for it! But if we find profits slipping and clients complaining, and we need a letter of introduction when we stumble home at 3:00 A.M., then something's very wrong. We need to make of habit of continually asking ourselves whether we might be better off with less business and more time for ourselves and for our families. We need to continually examine the quality of our work to ensure that it's not slipping because we've allowed ourselves to take on too much.

Being Detail Oriented

A baseball player who bats .250 gets three hits for every 12 times at bat. One who bats .333 gets four hits for every 12 times at bat. The difference one more hit for every 12 times at bat means the difference between an average major league ball player and a Hall of Fame inductee. Do you make it a habit to continually look for the little things? A good caterer isn't it picky, but is forever finding something that needs to be tweaked, adjusted, redone, or improved little things that most customers won't notice, but that greatly impact the overall professionalism of an event. Being aware of the details in flavors, looks, aromas, and tidiness separates the average caterers from the superstars. And, by all means, check the spelling, grammar, and punctuation in all your written materials, from brochures to contracts or hire someone to do it. Again, the goal is to present a professional image. Remember? The devil is in the details.

Setting High Standards

If you refuse to accept anything but the very best, you very often get the best. Successful caterers set their standards high and expect excellence from themselves and their staff members. They're never happy with the status quo, always striving to make each party, wedding, or event better than the last. They debrief after an event, asking staff for input and improvements. They know that if they fail to improve, they're leaving the door open for their competitors to capture a good customer or a larger share of the market. Successful caterers also make a habit of lifelong learning. They're forever reading, attending trade shows, and exploring areas that will help them improve their own businesses with new ideas. They challenge and reward their staff members for having the same attitude. Vince Lombardi, the late NFL coach, who during his career coached the first team to ever win the Super Bowl, put it this way: "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor."

How Does an Off-Premise Caterer Gauge Success?

There are a number of signs to look for when evaluating an existing off-premise catering business. Healthy companies rate highly in all of these areas. Those that are unhealthy, or even on the brink of failure, will not rate nearly as well. Management thoroughly plans, organizes, executes, and controls each catered event. Proper controls are in place for costs, accounts receivable and payable, and liquid assets such as cash and inventories. Theft prevention is also a priority. Food and service quality is well-controlled and meets or exceeds clients' approval. Pricing for food and services is fair and competitive with other firms in the marketplace. There is a spirit of healthy competition. The catering firm enjoys good working relationships with both clients and suppliers. Time and attention are given to food safety in storage, preparation, and display. Employees know the local health codes and follow them. There is sufficient working capital to operate the business. The firm can make loan payments as they become due. Excessive credit is not extended to clients. Budgets are prepared and followed. Business records, insurance coverage, and licenses are kept up to date. The information derived from these records is used to provide data to help manage the business.

Sales growth is controlled. There are sufficient financial and personnel resources to operate as business steadily grows. Market trends are anticipated. Management and staff have a good working knowledge of the off-premise catering field. There are solid, trusting relationships between management and staff. Staff members are well trained and feel truly appreciated because they are. Management works closely with a qualified accountant to plan for payment of taxes. And, finally, management is willing to seek qualified professional assistance if problems arise.