



Introduction to Off-Premise Catering Management

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There are more than 53,000 off-premise caterers in the United States. In fact, eight out of ten caterers working in the United States today are off-premise caterers, which means they serve food at locations away from their central food production facility. They might have a freestanding commissary, a kitchen facility used exclusively for preparing foods to be served at other locations; or they might use the kitchen of a hotel, restaurant, church, or club. In most cases, there is not a full-service, commercial kitchen facility at the location where the food is served.

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

As you might imagine, catering off-premise has similarities to a football team's playing all of its games away from home, often in unfamiliar surroundings. With no home field advantage, plenty of pitfalls can emerge without thorough planning, keen organizational skills, and the ability to "punt" when necessary.

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- Differences between off-premise and on-premise catering
- Challenges faced by off-premise caterers

- Traits and skills required for success as an off-premise caterer
- Food-related trends that could affect catering businesses
- Ways that off-premise caterers can gauge their success

Off-premise caterers can be divided into subcategories based on their specialties, although many catering companies do all of these as needed by their clients:

- Drop-off caterers supply only the food for an event. It might be attractive trays for a party, upscale box lunches for a business meeting, or prepared desserts on contract for a restaurant. The food is prepared and packaged at the catering kitchen; any last-minute details (reheating, plating, garnishing), as well as service and cleanup, are left to others. Drop-off service can also be an extremely profitable facet of a full-service catering company.
- Hot buffet caterers provide hot foods, delivered from their commissaries in insulated containers, ready to set out and serve. They sometimes provide serving staff 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 to be served there.

Off-premise catering can mean preparing thousands of box lunches for 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.

A Realistic Look at Off-Premise Catering

On a degree of difficulty scale from one to ten, with one meaning “easy” and ten meaning “most challenging,” on-premise catering is a three, and off-premise is 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 a more flexible budget who wants the highest level of service, the ultimate in food quality, and the finest in appointments—crystal stemware, silver-plated flatware, and luxurious linens. Between these two extremes is the midscale market

segment, which requires more polish and product selection than the low-budget sector, but less than the upscale.

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, putting the caterer in a position of always trying to top the previous event—or at least, put a new and interesting spin on it. A 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, catering off-premise events can be like living on the brink of disaster unless the caterer is cool-headed, flexible, and experienced. Amateurs may not recognize a volatile situation until it becomes a problem, later realizing they should have seen it coming. As caterers plod their way toward the completion of an event, there are thousands of potential “land mines” that can ruin an otherwise successful affair. Some examples follow:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 and into 40 feet of water.
- The table numbers have vanished, and the guests are ready to be seated for dinner.
- 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 has not been authorized for party use.

- The catering crew arrives at the party site with a van full of food, cooked to order—exactly one week early.
- 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 checkbook 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, the delivery person finds there is no one home and no one from whom to collect payment.
- 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."
- 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.
- The caterer's rental company representative calls the caterer the morning after an event to say that the \$600 rented chafing dish is missing. It was at the event site the night before, when the caterer left the client's home.

Get the picture? Oh, we could tell horror stories all day! Seasoned off-premise caterers agree that these are only a few of the thousands of obstacles that stand in the way of completing a catered event. Communication, both with clients and staff, and organizational skills will help prevent such disasters. This book addresses the various ways to professionally and successfully deal with difficult situations.

With all of these very real potential problems, why are thousands of people starting their own catering companies, risking their savings on dreams of future success? The reasons are numerous. They may love the adventure of working in new and exciting places. They look forward to—or at least, they don't fear—the peaks and valleys of the business cycle. They enjoy the feeling of satisfaction that comes from successfully pulling together all the elements for a spectacular party. They love the myriad challenges of this fascinating profession. Many are their own bosses, with no one to answer to but their clients. Many pick and choose only those parties and events they wish to cater. Many make six-figure incomes each year; others cater occasionally, just for the fun of it.

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 assume it will be less expensive to hire a caterer to help them entertain in their homes, or at unique off-premise sites, than to host an event in a hotel or restaurant. They forget to consider the cost of the rental equipment—such as tables, chairs, linens, china, glassware, and flatware—when they engage an off-premise caterer. In fact, an off-premise catered event can be more expensive, considering not only the cost of the rental equipment, but also other costs: transportation of food and supplies to the site, any specialty labor and/or décor, tenting, air-conditioning and/or heating, and other expenses.

Clients may save some money by buying their own liquor, but this savings can be insignificant when compared with these added costs. However, for many clients, the additional expense is far outweighed by the benefits of entertaining in the privacy of their own homes, or the uniqueness of hosting an event at a special off-premise location: 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, or transported to, the client's location. They have to think, for instance, about whether there will be a space with proper ventilation on site if foods are to be fried—a small kitchen in a high-rise office building's employee break room just won't do. On-premise caterers are not as limited in this regard, and they are generally supported by built-in, on-site equipment that can accommodate a wider variety of menus.

On-premise party personnel are often 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 in terms of recruiting and training staff; turnover is usually high because such work is on an as-needed basis.

There is definitely a greater potential for mishaps and 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, however, 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 unlimited challenges and rewards, off-premise catering may be the answer.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Off-Premise Catering

Specializing in off-premise catering offers several advantages for the catering professional. 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 foodservice 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, health, and food safety ordinances.) In addition, all of the necessary catering foodservice equipment, such as china, glassware, 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.

Hotels, clubs, and restaurants are not typically known for providing off-premise catering services, but for those that do, it can be a source of additional revenue. They can generate even more profit by providing other services, such as rental equipment, flowers, décor, music, entertainment, and other accessory services.

Off-premise caterers can arrange their own payment terms directly with clients, eliminating a middleman, whether it's a wedding planner or on-site food and beverage director at a venue. This form of direct payment provides for better cash control and fewer folks to share the profit.

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 book another party or indirectly generate another booking by speaking favorably to friends and coworkers about the event and the caterer. In other words, one party can create future parties.

Off-premise 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 has its disadvantages too. Catering managers, owners, and staff undergo periods of high stress during very busy periods. Deadlines must be met, and there are no excuses for missing them. 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 flow management challenging, 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 spent on the off-premise business—away from the main business—can be a detriment to their on-site operations. No matter how well organized you are, it is impossible 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.

Traits of the Successful Off-Premise Caterer

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 foodservice industry is important. Experience in food preparation and foodservice (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-the-house experience, and front-of-the-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 drive to be an entrepreneur is a highly desirable trait for off-premise caterers. A successful entrepreneur is willing to spend extraordinary amounts of time and energy to make the business successful, possesses an inherent sense of what is right for the business, has the ability to view all aspects of the business at once rather than focusing on only one or two parts, and demonstrates a strong desire to be his or her own boss and become financially independent.

Basic Business Knowledge. The list below is only the beginning. Remember, the caterer is running a company, no matter how small, and must run it just as professionally "on paper" and online as a caterer supervising a grand event at a client site. This knowledge includes:

- *A vision for the business.* The ability to create a business plan, and one-year and five-year goals, and to communicate these thoroughly and with enthusiasm to partners, investors, bankers, and others is key.
- *Accounting and bookkeeping skills.* You don't have to do your own bookkeeping, but understanding the financial aspects of operating a catering business is necessary

to work with those you hire to do it. This includes the ability to prepare and interpret such documents as a Profit and Loss Statement, Balance Sheet, and Chart of Accounts.

- *Computer skills.* You probably didn't decide to become a caterer to spend days agonizing over the design and content of your website, but it is a critical component of any successful catering operation. You'll be amazed at how much you can accomplish by using and managing e-mail, providing a website, and actively, creatively using social media tools to keep customers' attention. In addition, there are specialized programs to assist with everything from room layout for events, to costing out recipes, ordering supplies, and planning menus.
- *Legal knowledge.* It is also important to understand the legal aspects of catering. Laws that affect caterers include regulation of licensing, health, contracts, liability, labor, and alcoholic beverage service. You might not have to quote these laws on a daily basis, but you'll need to be aware of the basics, be alert for changes, and have access to attorneys and insurance specialists who can assist you if problems arise.
- *Human resource skills.* A caterer, like any other businessperson, has to be able to recruit, train, motivate, and manage people. The seasonal swings and rather transient nature of part-time workers in the foodservice industry make this particularly challenging.
- *Sales skills.* The ability to market the business creatively is key, from developing and implementing a marketing plan, to convincing the bank that you'll use the loan money wisely, to "closing the sale" when bidding against competitors for a job.

Ability to Plan, Organize, Execute, Control, and Measure Results. These are the five basic functions of management. To plan, a caterer must visualize in advance all the aspects of a catered event, and be able to 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 top-notch supervision at each event.

In terms of measuring results, you will be able to do this effectively only if you take the time to set goals for your company, decide on specific activities to meet those goals, and determine how you will track your progress to know when each goal has been met. For caterers, these are not just sales goals, but goals involving employee training, lowering food costs, reducing breakage in the dishroom—a whole variety of topics. We discuss this further in the “Developing a Strategic Plan” section on page 12.

Ability to Communicate with Clients and Staff. The key to good communication with clients and prospective clients is listening, paying careful attention to determine what the client needs and asking the necessary follow-up questions for clarification. 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 only shopping around. Astute caterers must be able to respond to client requests in such a manner that the client immediately gains confidence in their ability and knowledge.

Communicating with staff is often a more complex issue. In simple terms, it can be reduced to the ability to clearly tell staff what is expected so they understand and can deliver it, 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.

Ability to Take a Risk. Off-premise catering is a risky business; it is not for the faint-hearted 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 shelter in case of rain would probably be too risky. The event could be ruined by inclement weather, but the tent is a “calculation” that makes the risk acceptable.

Sound Body and Mind. Off-premise catering requires working long hours without rest or sleep, lifting and moving heavy objects, withstanding intense pressure as deadlines near, and even tolerating long periods of little or no business, which inevitably 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.

In terms of a caterer's brainpower, a "sound mind" includes common sense and the ability to reason, as well as a genuine fondness for people and the ability to feel comfortable in crowds and under pressure. A cool head will keep both staff and clients calm as 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 producing the appropriate look, feel, menu, service, and ambiance. They're always looking around; examining current events, culinary trends, and popular culture; and trying to figure out how to incorporate them into event and party plans. Those who don't consider themselves naturally creative certainly can learn to be, or they can employ creative people for their design team.

Open-Mindedness. This goes hand in hand with creativity, as open-minded caterers enjoy trying new recipes, seasonings, and menu pairings, and encourage staff members to do the same. They are willing to prepare unfamiliar dishes when requested by clients, after thoroughly testing and understanding the recipes. In addition, they are always seeking better ways to run every facet of their businesses. If someone else has a great idea, they embrace it rather than feeling resentful that they didn't think of it first.

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 outstanding caterer will find a way to deliver rather than use the changed circumstances as an excuse not to deliver.

Ability to Meet Clients' Needs. 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 upscale 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 often 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 necessary for 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

A strategic plan is a roadmap to help you determine the direction you wish your business to go, and the specific goals you must accomplish to get there. It begins with a statement of core values, which may include factors like client satisfaction; ethical business practices; staff satisfaction, training, and motivation; community service; and operation of 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:

Our company will meet the catering needs of the corporate community by providing high levels of service and food quality, which will 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:

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 isn't enough to brainstorm about these statements. Writing them down is the first step to making 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 should not be 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.

While goals are important, remember not to set too many, too quickly. It will scatter your energy and make progress more difficult. Typically, every goal requires certain trade-offs. To increase sales, for instance, you may need to drop prices, hire more staff to be able to cater more events, or spend money on advertising. The major goals can be broken into smaller, intermediate steps, with a time line to keep the company, and individual managers or department heads, on track.

Goals are not just for the owner of a company. The staff and other professionals employed by the company—accountant, banker, attorney, and all vendors—should also be well aware of the goals. You will need their help to achieve them, and you want them on your side, committed to your goals. Too often, caterers believe they can do everything 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 Management, Attention to Detail

Have you ever heard the old saying, "The devil is in the details"? Another way to put it is that we've all been bitten by a mosquito or stung by a bee, but none of us has ever been bitten by an elephant. It's always the little things that get us.

In catering, the details are almost endless, a stream of tiny elements, any of which 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 serving the guests or preparing food in the kitchen. Success 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 is what's 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. Unlike a restaurant, in which the owners often have the advantage of market research to determine who their target customers will be in a particular location, a caterer must be comfortable serving multiple demographic groups, at all sorts of locations and a variety of price points. At its simplest, what this means is maintaining flexibility, while keeping prices fair and controlling costs.

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 goal in almost any situation is to find the best possible solution with the least number of drawbacks.

Although hundreds of books have been written about effective decision making, the following tips from management consultant and author Connie Sitterly should be helpful. They're paraphrased from an article she wrote back in 1990 in *The Meeting Manager*, but they are still up-to-the-minute when it comes to making tough decisions successfully.

- Remember that there's seldom only one acceptable solution to the problem. Choose the best alternative.
- Make decisions that help achieve the company objectives.
- 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.
- Allow quality time for planning and decision making. Pick a time when you are energetic and your mind is fresh.
- Realize that you will never please everyone. Few decisions meet with unanimous approval. The appointed authority, not the majority, rules.
- Make time for making decisions. In business, delaying a decision can cost thousands of dollars.

- Put decision making in perspective. Every executive feels overwhelmed at times by either the enormity or the number of the decisions that must be made during a business day. For peace of mind, accept that you are doing the best job you can with the time, talent, and resources you have.
- 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 anything may cost too much in terms of time. There are times when you just have to do something.

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, you can be certain its owners and managers are people with leadership skills.

Leaders are able to get people to do things they don't necessarily like to do—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 in which it is located. 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.

The following guidelines are adapted from an article by Carol McKibben in *Special Events* magazine:

- Become known for doing what you say you will do.
- 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.

It might surprise you to learn that these tips were written more than 20 years ago. They are proof that professionalism truly never goes out of style.

Ethics in Management

In today's business world, lack of ethics is among the most widely discussed topics. We read and hear of illegal payoffs, scandals, and other forms of questionable behavior bringing down some of the nation's largest corporations and politicians. Off-premise caterers are in no way exempt from ethical concerns. Even the smallest caterers deal with issues of fairness, legal requirements, and honesty on a daily basis. Examples include truth in menu disclosures, product substitutions, advertising claims, dealing with unexpected or unjustified last-minute add-ons to an event price, and even underbidding a competitor when the client has inadvertently disclosed the competitor's price.

The ethical caterer will assume responsibility for the host to ensure that the host plans an event that is in the best interests of the guests, in every respect. For instance, a host who wishes to serve alcohol to underage guests is out of line and must be advised that this is not acceptable. 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 schedule more events on a certain day or evening than the company can reasonably accommodate. The extra money certainly is tempting. Unethical caterers will rationalize that they can juggle all the events, even if an inexperienced supervisor or staff must oversee these events, or the kitchen staff will not be able to prepare their 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 catering company. Some caterers refuse to do this; they worry that if the client is not pleased with the other firm, the caterer who initially 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 underreport income or overstate expenses. They rationalize that no one will know if they accept cash for a party, and 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 kickbacks 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, and 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, midparty, will ask you to stay “a couple hours of overtime, just to wrap things up”—and 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 them, thus cutting out the middleman who recommended them.

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 vendor, you can either refuse 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 uncomfortable 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 they’ll ask for some other special favor “just this once.”

These requests are unfair, and you are 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.

The Jefferson Center of Character Education has set forth a list of ten “universal values”: honesty, integrity, promise keeping, fidelity, fairness, caring for others, respect for others, responsible citizenship, pursuit of excellence, and accountability. These values should provide some solid guidance for any businessperson who considers himself or herself a true professional.

Separating Yourself from the Competition

Great caterers do more than imitate—they innovate. 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. As with any career, staying ahead of competitors requires catering professionals to reexamine their business strategies from time to time.

Look at the caterers in your own community and you will note the distinct advantages of those who offer unique menus and services, perhaps even in unique locations. Then again, some simply do what they do best—they have a niche, a particular client

base or type of event for which they are well known, and never vary their formulas. Their clients love them and get exactly what they expect.

Other caterers seem to copy everyone else. They ricochet from one concept or recipe to the other, and you sense that they probably never bother to gauge clients' reactions or see if their services really meet their clients' needs. If they read about a trendy dish in a magazine, they feel they have to serve it, whether they do a good job of it or not.

Most caterers fall somewhere between these two extremes, blending successful ideas from the past with new twists and interesting concepts.

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 foodservice management job. Another has an exclusive off-premise contract for a sports facility; a third is the on-premise caterer for a city club, with the added benefit of extra catering business from the club members. Capitalize on the audience you have—they're (almost) already yours!

Personal Management

Off-premise caterers work an average of 59 hours a week, according to the industry group *CaterSource*. Time management, stress management, and personal organization skills must be mastered to manage your own work life, as well as your business, at peak efficiency. Time is our most precious commodity, and to waste it because of being overstressed or disorganized will inevitably result in less-than-desirable results.

Stress Management

Stress generally comes from interaction with others and from having to meet deadlines, although it is often self-imposed. A certain amount of stress and tension is necessary to achieve the best results—and you might enjoy the adrenaline rush you feel when you're in the middle of a busy event and know there's a lot at stake. However, consistently high stress levels over prolonged time periods can cause chronic fatigue, irritability, cynicism, hostility, inflexibility, and difficulty in thinking clearly. Catering managers who are overstressed are unable to perform at maximum capability.

Stress cannot always be eliminated, but it can often be controlled through:

- Daily exercise. This might mean a brisk walk or run, some dedicated time on a spinning bike, or other aerobic pursuits that increase the heart rate. Some folks

purposefully take their minds off work when they exercise; for others, the daily walk or run is a time to reflect on the week's priorities or get organized for the coming day.

- Relaxation techniques, including meditation and yoga.
- Writing down the issues that cause stress. Identify those facets of your life that can be controlled, and decide to make the best of those that cannot. Brainstorm ways to deal with the controllable stress factors.
- Reading articles and books on stress reduction.

Furthermore, reducing stress is a natural offshoot of hiring excellent people, training them well, and trusting them enough so that you can delegate some of the event details and responsibilities to them.

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 pursuits 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 certain time periods: a lifetime, five years, and/or for each year, month, week, and day. Without written goals, off-premise caterers will find it impossible to effectively manage their time. Time management involves choosing how to spend your time, so there's no way to make proper choices without knowing the desired outcome or goal. The captain of a ship without a destination cannot choose the proper course. He or she will cruise aimlessly at sea, never reaching his or her 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 their quest to efficiently manage time:

- Make daily, detailed lists of goals and objectives.
- Do as much online and on the computer as possible. It saves paper, produces files that are easily shared with others, and creates an electronic trail that can be useful when you have to prove when something was e-mailed or received.

- Use an up-to-the-minute mobile device to stay in touch while away from the office. Even cell phones are lifesavers at off-premise catering locations when emergency and other calls are necessary. If you have unexpected downtime, they enable you to use it efficiently by checking e-mail or returning 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 time management seminar or course to learn more techniques.

One of the biggest time wasters for a caterer is also a source of business that cannot be ignored: the prospective client who calls or e-mails with questions. This is, however, an interruption that can be controlled. Whoever answers the phone at your business should always qualify inquiries by asking:

- The date of the event
- Whether a location has been selected
- The number of guests
- The budget for the event

In addition, as you set up your website "Contact Us" section, you might want to include prompts to obtain this information. Why? First of all, time can be wasted by talking about an event before you ask the date and discover you are unable 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 the time they spend on low-priority, low-payoff tasks and turn their attention to those things that will bring the greatest rewards.

These essential 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 writing 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 will be the most successful in the long run. They become the leading caterers in their communities, in their states, and in the country.

Getting and Staying Organized

When projects, tasks, catering kitchens, and offices are well 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:

- Create a system that ensures that every step of every client transaction—from the first contact, to follow-up communication, contract, changes to the plan, and a post-event debrief—can be traced, and that there's someone to take responsibility for each step along the way. Once again, strive to create a trail that can be double-checked at any time.
- 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, and color and fabric samples—anything for that particular job. No matter how much planning can be done on a computer, a binder system can be very useful for complex jobs.
- 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 frequently used items close by.
- Focus on one project at a time, rather than jumping from one thing to another. This can be more easily accomplished by blocking out some uninterrupted time during the day to work on major projects.

- 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.
- At the end of each day, prepare a list of things to do for the following day. Some people manage to do this as the very first thing in the morning.

To summarize, off-premise caterers who can effectively deal with stress, manage their time, delegate tasks, 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

Let's examine some additional techniques, philosophies, and real-life ways to be successful in the challenging field of off-premise catering.

Habits are things we do automatically, like brushing our teeth, combing our hair, or straightening a tablecloth that's uneven as we help set up a banquet room. We hardly think about them; we just do them. Stephen R. Covey wrote *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, which has been a bestseller for years—you should read it if you haven't already. But what are some habits that mark successful caterers? What separates star performers from the rest of the crowd? With a nod to Mr. Covey, here are seven key habits.

Being Willing to Take Calculated Risks

A popular saying is, "A turtle goes nowhere until it sticks its neck out." 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 might find you can actually write with either hand. In the same spirit, successful caterers make things happen by taking calculated risks, whether the risk is trying new menu items, implementing 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—and eventually are left behind in this competitive industry.

Expressing 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 the needs, wishes, and desires of the people you work with and for? 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 isn't just a matter of food and presentation and theme trends, although these are critical. Caterers who are not tech-savvy, including the use of social media, are missing out on huge opportunities to create “buzz” about what they are doing.

At the very least, you and your support staff must get into the habit of regularly updating websites, responding to promptly to e-mail correspondence, and providing proposals, contracts, and other documents electronically. If you are not in the habit of working online, you're now hopelessly behind the times.

Managing Your Time and Setting Priorities

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 goes home at night thinking 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, the work will get done. But what is 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 submitted on time.

Successful caterers spend their time in the areas that generate the biggest paybacks 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.

Putting Quality Before Quantity

The previous example aside, 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 your products and services suffers, so does the quality of your daily life. 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 working.

As long as the business we have is both enjoyable and profitable, we need to make a habit of continually asking ourselves whether we might be better off with a little less business, to leave more time for ourselves and our families. We need to continually examine the overall quality of our work to ensure that it isn't 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 nitpicky 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 affect the overall professionalism of an event. An awareness of the details of flavor, appearance, aroma, 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 are rarely 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 these areas. Those that are unhealthy, perhaps 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 that of 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 and regularly discussed.
- 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.

Looking Ahead—Catering in the Future

What does the future hold for caterers—and who will survive in the roller-coaster economy? When the Institute of Food Technologists listed its Top Ten Food Trends in *Food Technology* magazine (April 2011), the economic downturn known as the Great Recession was named as the reason for some of them. Americans told pollsters that the majority (71 percent) now bring their own snacks from home to ballgames and movie theaters to save a few dollars. In 2010, more than half (58 percent) of full-time workers told the Food Marketing Institute they packed their lunches instead of eating out on their lunch breaks, up from 27 percent just three years earlier.

Other factors, however, look more promising as trends for off-premise caterers to watch closely. Consumers that say they prefer fresh, locally grown and produced foods, rather than processed products from faraway factories. They are interested in trying more whole-grain, high-fiber, low-sodium, and no-trans-fat foods. This gives the savvy caterer an excellent reason to seek out and nurture relationships with the best local purveyors, as well as to update recipes with the goal of better nutrition. (If anybody can make something delicious and beautiful out of so-called healthy ingredients, it would be a good caterer!)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture replaced its food pyramid with a new symbol, a dinner plate, in 2011. The change (explained at www.choosemyplate.gov) is supposed to be an easier visual cue to help consumers understand how to balance their meals based on the five food groups. You can bet that savvy caterers are studying it too.

As health-conscious as Americans have become, the market research also shows they still love their treats. The popularity of baking is surging, although most home cooks

admitted in a 2009 survey that they're not very skilled at it. This could mean a niche for elegant desserts, artisan breads, and/or homestyle pastries. The American Culinary Federation says mini and bite-sized desserts are among its member chefs' most popular menu additions—another perfect trend for the catering business.

On supermarket shelves, some of the fastest-growing product categories are specialty chocolates, cookies, and wines, and 63 percent of adults said that they purchased “gourmet foods” in 2010, an increase of 17 percentage points over the previous year.

Perhaps one way to interpret the trends is that most people know they should eat healthier, but they also want (and believe that they deserve) to stray from those restrictions once in a while. Catering is all about making special occasions special, so there will continue to be a market for it.

Staffing woes will continue to be monumental, as hiring, training, and retraining get tougher. Foodservice has always been a somewhat transient industry. Astute caterers will use preemployment aptitude and personality testing, master online staff scheduling systems, and develop their own training programs. They will also realize, if they haven't already, that they must treat their employees at least as well as they treat their clients. Along the same lines, in a top-tier catering operation, caterers will understand that their employees must treat each other with the same courtesy and respect that they show their clients.

Caterers of the future will come to realize that bigger is not necessarily better. Having a large volume of business is admirable—but only when the quality of your work rises to the same level. A company can grow to the point where quality slips, gross profit margins lag, more equipment is needed, overhead costs expand, and the bottom line shrinks proportionately. Intelligent caterer will downsize and watch margins and profits grow—and overall stress levels diminish—as they become more selective about the clientele they service.

Caterers are realizing that “high tech” will never replace personalized service, or “high touch,” but that without high tech, they'll limit their potential for high touch. In an industry where, amazingly, some caterers still don't accept credit cards, savvy businesspeople are learning to embrace new technology, launching interactive websites and e-mail marketing campaigns. Caterers can now generate proposals, rental orders, packing lists, staffing schedules, and instant financial statements digitally. And they're realizing that computer-savvy business owners have more time to do what they love—which is run their business.

Competition will continue to increase. Sales will grow, but not without some dips, because economic woes and news headlines—from terrorist attacks to wild weather—and

the resulting fears cannot help but affect the catering profession. An increased use of security staff and cameras at high-profile events (and in some cases, to thwart theft) are the results of this heightened awareness.

Mega-event catering is acknowledged as an excellent way to grow business—at golf and tennis tournaments, NASCAR races, political conventions, air shows or boat shows, and more. In addition to being profitable, mega-events expose the caterer to a wider range of potential clients. Then again, one caterer from Augusta, Georgia, generates enough revenue from serving sandwiches and beverages at the Masters Golf Tournament that he need not cater at all the rest of the year. The pressure experienced in servicing huge, multiday events is as big as the events themselves, but the rewards can be significant.

The Off-Premise Catering Model

Exhibit 1.1 is a diagram of interrelated factors in off-premise catering. It is included to prompt discussion about how management philosophies and current laws trigger multiple planning efforts in every aspect of the caterer’s business, from how the company

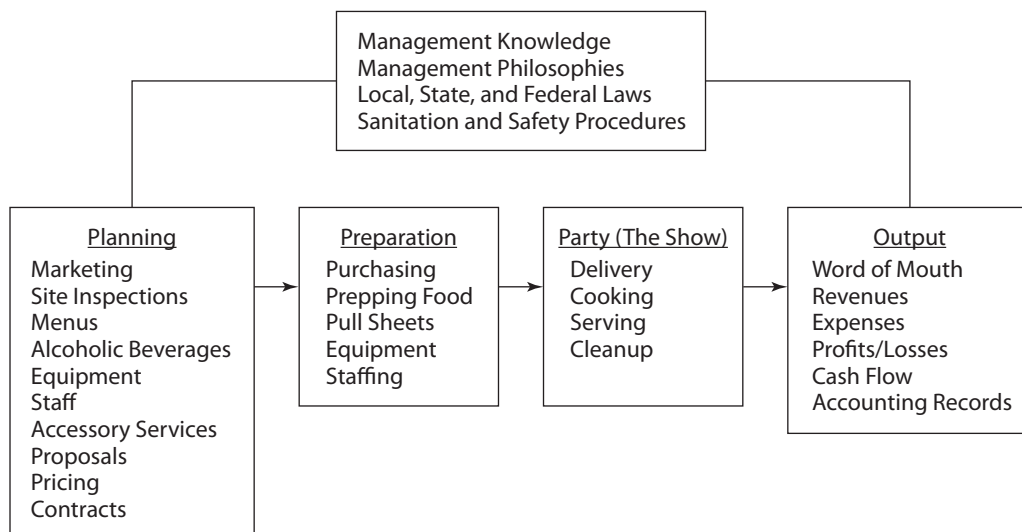


Exhibit 1.1 Off-Premise Catering Model

will go about obtaining business, to the types of food and beverages to be served, to the add-on services (florals, event design, and music, etc.) that will be offered and what the prices will be.

Together, these details form the basis for what the caterer can offer a client—first, in the form of a proposal (which is then agreed on or modified), leading to a contract being prepared and signed.

As the party or event date approaches, certain operational elements are addressed, such as:

- Hiring and scheduling staff
- Informing key staff about event details
- Purchasing and pre-preparation of menu items
- Ordering equipment as needed from rental companies
- Booking contractors who will provide add-on services
- Obtaining necessary licenses and permits for use of the site, serving alcohol, and so on
- Preparing a pull sheet, or packing sheet, that includes all items to be supplied by the commissary to produce the party
- Coordinating all beverage and accessory services with the client and the vendors

All the preplanning elements culminate on the day or night of “the show.” This is the point at which the staff, equipment, food, and other vendors arrive at the site, and the event takes place. Of course, for large events, the setup process may take as long as a week.

After the event, there are also certain necessary outcomes; on the diagram they are referred to as *output*. These include:

- Invoicing
- Getting feedback from clients and guests about the successes (and/or problems) associated with the event
- Getting feedback from key staff members about the event, from praise for servers to any concerns that may have arisen
- Determining revenues and expenses
- Updating accounting records and paying employees and contractors

By reading and studying this book, you will gain a thorough understanding of how all these elements combine to produce a successful off-premise event for a professional caterer.

Summary

This chapter provides a wide-ranging look at what is necessary to start an off-premise catering company or develop an off-premise catering division of an existing foodservice operation.

Much of the focus of this chapter is on the individual who plans to start the company—his or her personality traits, temperament, and sense of ethics. This is because catering is both a very personal and intensely social, hands-on type of business. Organizational skills, time management, financial acumen, and an eye for culinary and entertainment trends are just a few of the important skills mentioned in the chapter. Some of these skills can be learned or honed; others are more instinctive.

The chapter also summarizes some trends in consumer behavior that will affect caterers, for better or worse. These include Americans' continued health consciousness, growing preference for locally produced foods, and concerns about the economy after the Great Recession. The latter has prompted many people to cut corners in their food decisions but also has created a customer base that believes it's okay to splurge once in a while on high-quality items, whether the treat is a decadent dessert or a loaf of artisan bread. Caterers can use their knowledge of such trends to market to prospective customers.

Study Questions

1. Choose any three catering “crises” from those listed on pages 3–4 and write a short explanation of how you would handle the crisis if you were the caterer living the nightmare, and why.
2. Why can it be more expensive for clients to host a catered event at their home than at a hotel or restaurant?
3. What questions should a catering company's receptionist learn to ask incoming callers, and why?
4. This chapter includes “The Seven Habits of Highly Successful Caterers” (page 24). Write a paragraph about what the eighth “habit” would be, in your view, based on what you have read in this book so far.
5. Are there ever instances in which it is acceptable to turn down potential business as a caterer? Explain your answer.