



Operator Billy Cossette tracks his Restaurant's CEM performance with his leaders.



Manager Sofia Fernandez checks in with lunch guests at Mountain Island FSR in Charlotte, North Carolina.

# LISTENING

Guest feedback inspires Operators to continuously improve.

**FOR OPERATOR BILLY COSSETTE**, it's always been about excellence. Ensuring guests are well cared for at Pine Island Road FSR in Cape Coral, Florida, is his No. 1 priority.

"At the end of the day, your customers are what drive your business," Billy says. "We spend a lot of time digging into what our customers are telling us—at a very deep level—to determine where we can improve."

This focus on improvement helps Billy ensure his Restaurant stands out in Cape Coral, where residents don't have many options for quick, delicious meals. Although Billy could use his lack of competitors as an excuse to lower standards, he sees it as a reason to elevate them.

"There aren't a lot of food options in our area, and the ones that do exist are nicer,

sit-down restaurants," he explains. "I figure if we're going to do it, we've got to do it well. We have to keep up with these other places and show our customers they can get the same kind of experience and service here but spend a lot less on their meal."

It turns out Billy's instinct is in line with what today's guests want. Quick-service customers increasingly value service aspects like a friendly, attentive staff and a comfortable environment, according to Empathica Inc., a customer experience management system provider.

Addressing what guests value can have big benefits. According to Empathica's "2013 Quick-Service Restaurant Benchmark Study," the likelihood of a return visit increases 61 percentage points when guests are highly satisfied, and highly

satisfied guests are four times as likely to recommend a restaurant to others.

Ensuring guests are satisfied with their dining experience depends on anticipating their needs, Billy says. He knows guests' needs fluctuate throughout the day, so he and his team use Customer Experience Monitor (CEM) comments, the CEM's monthly X-Ray Report, the Restaurant Operational Evaluation (ROE) and the electronic Restaurant Quality Assessment (eRQA) to track their performance and assess needed improvements.

"We focus most on customer comments because they show that there is always something to improve on," Billy says. During the Saturday lunch rush, which is his Restaurant's busiest time of the week, his Team Members tended to focus on speed



Operator DuPre Bingham with his leadership team at Mountain Island FSR. Front row, left to right: Team Leader Christianne Sweigart, Manager Sofia Fernandez, Drive-thru Director Erica Mundy, Operations Director Wilma Stanley. Back row, left to right: Manager Anna Barnes, Manager John Waldron, Operator DuPre Bingham and Manager Charlie McClure.

of service and taste of food. However, after examining guest comments from that time-frame, he and his team learned something unexpected: Saturday guests, who are often enjoying a meal with their families, place significant value on attentive and courteous employees. To address that disconnect, he now staffs an additional Team Member in the dining room on Saturdays.

"If a guest comes in on Wednesday and feels impressed by how attentive we were, they should be able to come in on Saturday with their family and get the same attentive service," Billy says.

### Have a Holistic Approach

Guest expectations are always top of mind at Morrison Road FSR in Brownsville, Texas, says Operator Alex Aviles. That's because his guests embrace a small-town way of life that's big on commitment, communication and community. "One of the things I convey to every Team Member is that the Restaurant belongs to the community," Alex says. "The community is heavily invested in what happens in the Restaurant."

Guests communicate their feedback face to face with Team Members, as well as through the CEM. "When you collaborate with your community, your community will tell you how they feel about your business," Alex says.

He was reminded of that when he recently cut the number of scheduled Team Members by one, a staffing change he thought would encourage

Team Members to be more productive and improve speed of service. However, as he learned from guests, it didn't quite have the intended effect. "Our speed of service stayed the same, but we could not connect with guests as much as we were before because there was one less person," he says. "Our numbers in attentive and courteous employees went down."

It's a constant balancing act, says Alex, who believes Operators must view Operational Excellence scores as one component of the customer experience rather than its sole measure.

"If you're only chasing that OE score, you're going to grow one score, but you might do it at the expense of the others," he says. "Not everything's going to be perfect, so you have to remember what's important to your customers."

One aspect of Operational Excellence that matters to guests is cleanliness. For Alex, a clean, polished Restaurant requires wiping down tables and mopping floors, having his parking lot regularly power-washed and re-stripped, and patching and painting damaged walls. In short, he invests to improve the guest environment.

"To me, it's those little details that create a good guest experience—to take it from good to great," says Alex, adding that guests reward those "little details" with repeat visits.

"If you provide a great customer experience," he says, "you will see that translated in the bottom line."

### Support Strong Leaders

At Northlake Parkway FSR and Mountain Island FSR in Charlotte, North Carolina, a "REMARK"able customer experience requires strong leadership in Operational Excellence, says multi-Restaurant Operator DuPre Bingham.

"The biggest thing I ever did to increase my OE scores was hiring the kind of leaders who can deliver," says DuPre, who has made developing future leaders a major priority. "I hire leaders who have a vision—people who are trying to get somewhere. When you're developing leaders who have the potential to be future Operators, it forces you to have better people."

Cultivating leadership skills benefits his leaders as well as guests; DuPre draws a straight line from the former to the latter. "My leaders are always in the dining room asking people about their food," he says. "Ultimately, they're the ones who are accountable for the guest experience."

In order to create that accountability, he breaks his large team into smaller teams whenever possible. He has one leader in charge of speed of service, for instance, and another who oversees taste of food. He even has a leader dedicated to executing excellence with Waffle Potato Fries™. "We have empowered our leaders by allowing them to effect big change in a small environment," DuPre says. "Each leader is challenged to systemize their area to make it more and more consistent and predictable."

Leaders receive Operational Excellence scores on a daily basis. And because no one wants the lowest score, they brainstorm ways to improve the guest experience in their area of responsibility, whether it's adding Team Members in the dining room or asking Team Members to wear ties for a more professional look.

The act of setting goals reminds leaders and Team Members that they don't receive OE scores; they earn them. "Nobody gets 100 percent," DuPre says. "But if you set a goal in your head, you can come a lot closer to 100 than you think."

However, the ultimate objective isn't a high OE score; it's a satisfied guest.

"It's a mindset," he says. "We have to remember we're in the business of making customers happy." **CRF**