

CATERING CONCESSIONS/F&B
NICK BRADLEY



KEY

INGREDIENTS

Image courtesy of Centerplate

Leading lights in the catering concessions community identify the key trends, innovations and considerations that will shape the in-stadia culinary experience in the years to come

For hospitality expert Robert Read, owner of the UK-based Robert Read Associates (RRA), you can have all the bells and whistles in your catering concessions environment but get the fundamentals wrong and you're doomed to failure. "It's exciting to investigate new trends or the next big thing, but as I travel around to venues it strikes me there's still around 80% to go in terms of just getting the basics of a successful operation right.

"A lot of it boils down to logistics: the right amount of product – limited but good quality," adds Read, who is also a professional member of the FSCI (Foodservice Consultants Society International). "The correct production equipment is vital – new technology allows us to serve a lot of people very quickly, but that doesn't come cheap," he warns. "Then there's the correct storage of nicely presented products for sale; a good service system; the correct layout; the right number of tills and service points. Again, it's baffling how many venues don't even get these simple things lined up."

Tools of the trade

Such facets are especially vital when you've only got a very small window of opportunity to serve large numbers of people. "A lot of equipment used in stadia catering areas is off-the-shelf and struggles to meet the demand," feels KCCJ's Kevin Slatter. "Our target at Arsenal's Emirates was to offer food and drink to around 50% of the crowd within the 15-minute half-time period, or around 30,000 people." Traditionally, most stadia have only been able to reach 10-20% of the target audience.

The success being enjoyed in North London is a showcase for having the right tools. In-cup coffee products, for instance, are *de rigueur* for many large stadia in order to keep up with the demand, although Slatter believes the quality is poor – akin to "drinking sludge," he laughs. "We worked with a manufacturer to develop coffee-making machines specifically designed for football grounds. We also developed a fast-pour beer system with IMI Cornelius that allows bar staff to serve an ice-cold

pint in five seconds. We're offering the fans a better beverage experience, yet we've helped Arsenal maximise their revenue streams."

KCCJ was also the principal catering and beverage consultant for London's O₂ Arena, and Slatter suspects there's a great deal more that stadia can learn from the arena experience. "The concourses are much brighter, with nowhere near as much separation between the hospitality and general admission areas; general ticket holders are treated as equally important." Consequently, he thinks clubs are missing a trick by not offering more to the people who, at the end of the day, constitute the bulk of the customer base. Slatter cites in

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particular improving the ambience and enhancing comfort by considering leaning shelves, stools and high-poseur tables. "A bit more thought about comfort will give stadia what they want – keeping customers in the catering areas for longer."

Slatter also has another idea up his sleeve, which has been tried and tested at Rosenberg's Lerkendal Stadion in Norway. "Self-service has worked really well there," he reveals. "This enabled them to reduce staffing levels by 50% because you had the same people preparing and stacking the food and then taking cash at the tills." Norwegians are obviously a trustworthy bunch, then? "The theft in the end was so small that it was irrelevant," Slatter reports. "And our initial figures suggested profit increased by



“Just consider the potential new revenue stream from the additional advertising and sponsorship inventory” *Bob Pascal*

40-50%. In fact, after 12 months, it was so successful that all other concession areas were converted in the Trondheim stadium – it’s not a major cost, just a change of operational procedures.”

Team talk

Staffing is an area where Robert Read feels there is much room for improvement. “You’ve got to make sure that they’re sufficiently trained and motivated – it might be a cultural thing but caterers have an in-built resistance to that,” he says. “They think if they can use eight members of staff rather than 10, that’s an automatic saving – well, not if you’ve lost £400 worth of revenue it’s not!”

In fact, there’s a whole crop of what Read refers to as ‘front-of-house’ issues that could be transformed, even down to the placement of remote condiment stations. “Nothing slows up service more than people standing there squirting mustard into a hot dog – move them away from the counters!”

Helping people to quickly select their items is also a prerequisite, hence the need for good signage, says Read – who has worked with the Aviva Stadium, the City of Manchester Stadium (now the Etihad), Twickenham and Wembley, to name but a few. “Digital signage is a trend here, and if things can be clearly displayed that’s fantastic, such as price changes and special offers. Price changes can be a major exercise in terms of time and cost.”

Digital revolution?

There’s no shortage of experts in stadia catering to tell you that digital menu boards are the next big thing. “Stadia are really the perfect environment for these sorts of systems,” suggests Bob Pascal from Centerplate. “We’re working with Ping HD at Candlestick Park in San Francisco, where we’ve installed digital menu boards in 20 of their concession areas,” he says. “There are two main benefits – flexibility and communications. These buildings might host events from football games

to conventions, so it allows you to adjust an entire menu, reduce and increase the offer, alter prices in real-time, etc. Some facilities might have entirely separate events on the same day that might call for an entirely new menu or different branding.

“Certainly the stadium can also use digital signage to communicate messages in-game about ticket sales, upcoming events, etc., but we can also use it for specific menu promotions, limited-time offers, even souvenirs, to drive incremental sales,” Pascal continues. There are a number of corollary benefits, too, such as showing the dish being prepared. “Motion attracts the eye,” he says. “You buy with the eye and you repeat with the palette. Even if it’s something as simple as a beverage pouring into a glass, that engages more than still footage on a traditional menu board.”

So why follow in the footsteps of Candlestick Park, AT&T Park, Coors Field and BC Place, and opt for a Ping HD system? “If you’re not convinced by incremental food and beverage sales, and increased fan satisfaction, just consider the potential new revenue stream from the additional advertising and sponsorship inventory,” Pascal says.

Robert Read, however, advises a bit of caution when it comes to the placement of TV screens – any adverse impact on operational efficiency could affect your bottom line. “You don’t want people milling around watching TV screens in concession areas, so moving non-essential ones away from service areas is a must,” he suggests. Even ‘old chestnuts’ such as the location of bins and toilets in relation to the concession areas should be scrutinised in any successful setup, as queues forming for either could potentially clash. “Protection and ambience, the actual comfort of the



Image courtesy of Ping HD



Image courtesy of KCCJ

(Top) Ping HD digital menu boards at Candlestick Park (Above) Fast-pour dispensing systems installed by KCCJ (Main) The StadiumVision system at BC Place in Vancouver



Image courtesy of KFC

front-of-house areas, is also vital," he adds. And let's not forget space: in some venues the problem might not be lack of demand for product – just the lack of room to deliver a more profitable operation.

Decanting

Decanting is a favourite topic of Read's, who says he's been to too many venues where – despite the fact that they're selling drinks in plastic bottles – they're insisting on them being poured. "See how long it takes to pour four Diet Cokes and then ask yourself if this is a sensible procedure or not!

"Documentation is often overlooked, too," he feels. "Venues should forecast, produce schedules, etc., but many people instead prefer to use their own instinct. You can see a perfect example of this at 3pm on a Saturday, when the queues die down at kick-off and staff sit back and relax when they should be preparing for the *really* busy period. Proper documentation would tell them they need to be preparing X amount of burgers at 3.15pm in order to meet the half-time demand."

Another bugbear of Read's concerns wastage. "Once more, I think it's a cultural thing, but caterers are totally adverse to any wastage," he says. "And although too much is a concern, not having enough product for sale is worse. I find many venues steer on the wrong side of that line. Personally, I'd rather throw away 10 pints of beer at the end than have £100 worth of lost sales because you've run out!"

Wastage

Beer waste is particularly rampant in stadia, according to Kevin Mack from Infinit Systems, who

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FINANCIALLY SOUND

George Foreman's Lean Mean Grilling Machine it isn't, but a new finance-tracking solution from hospitality solutions provider Agilysys can allow large-scale facilities such as stadia to eliminate manual processes, reduce staff costs and improve customer service. "Cash Manager tracks the revenue coming into the stadium, its location in the process, and manages the flow of revenue into the cash office," explains Matthew Prosser – meaning money can be reconciled more quickly and accurately. "Imagine Twickenham, for instance, taking hundreds of thousands of pounds on a matchday: for them to be able to cash up pretty much at the final whistle, and for there to be less than 1% in variance, that's pretty unheard of.

"Every year, football clubs and sporting venues budget a set amount coming in through concessions that they'll write off either as a result of lost cash or fraudulent activity," the Agilysys man continues. "They might budget anything up to 4% – and I've even come across 12%."

Customers such as the O₂ Arena, West Bromwich Albion FC, and Chester Racecourse are already reaping the benefits from Cash Manager as part of a wider EPOS system. "We can support multiple venues, simultaneous events and multiple revenue centres," Prosser reveals. "We can generate real-time revenue data from operational systems such as EPOS, stock and even access systems such as ticketing, parking, etc, so decision-makers can be alerted in real-time when it counts most. From day one, monetary and stock shrinkage can be reduced to less than 1% and a minimum of 2% reduction of labour costs per operational day." The result? Depending on the size of the venue, ROI might take just one event to pay for the system.



(Above) Mr Red's Smokehouse at the Cincinatti Reds baseball park (Main) A professional setup will result in a better return on your investment

has unveiled a solution – the Cold-Core insulated beverage piping system. "Modern stadia employ some of today's latest technology, but still use beer systems that haven't seen a major improvement since remote dispensing caught on nearly 40 years ago." Cold-Core, though, uses technology gleaned from deepsea oil pipelines and has been in development for more than two years. "It's gone through batteries of tests that have shown vast improvements over the industry's best trunk lines," Mack says. "It insulates up to 395% better, in doing so notably reducing both energy and beer waste through more efficient temperature control."

With Cold-Core, insulating properties remain constant indefinitely, a huge benefit over trunk lines that begin to degrade immediately. "Eliminating bulky trunk lines reduces shipping costs by up to 80%," Mack explains. Why is this a big deal? Trunk line replacement for a stadium can cost as much as US\$1 million and is recommended every 10 years. "Cold-Core can reduce that cost by up to 80%."

The energy savings should not be undercooked, either. Beer systems can use more than one billion watts of power annually, Mack's figures show, so he clearly feels there's an opportunity to be had.



(Left) The Original New York Streetdog outlet at White Hart Lane (Below left) A firm favourite at Oriole Park at Camden Yards



GREEN SERVICE

Accreditation to BS8901 – which specifies the requirements for a sustainability management system for events – could help UK clubs increase their events and conferencing, according to Alastair Scott from Sodexo Prestige. “Who wouldn’t want to include in their marketing that their events business is run in a sustainable way? It’s a huge positive,” Scott suggests. “We have a pilot site up and running and it’s something we’re looking to introduce across all of our businesses. Clubs such as Manchester United want to be seen to be ‘green’, so it’s good from a brand perspective.”

Consider only using recycled paper in meeting rooms or switching to tap water instead of bottled. While proportion purchasing could be increased so that the food miles reduce over time to the point where you’re using a high number of local suppliers. “These sorts of things make you a bit more aware of how you’re running your business, carbon footprints, etc. Eventually, everybody will be doing this – it won’t be an innovation but a necessity.”

Brand aware

Steadfast and determined, Adam Elliott is on a mission to transform the culinary experience for sports fans in the UK by adopting certain facets of the US approach to branded retail outlets on stadia concourses. “In my opinion, fans are no longer happy with the same old, largely standard fare, whether that’s a burger, a hot dog, or a pie,” says the chief executive of The Lindley Group, which can count Manchester City FC among its many clients. “I want to move away from what we think fans want to actually considering where they go and what they eat when they’re not at a match.”

Convinced that catering in football stadia has lagged behind commercial high-street outlets, Elliott’s aim is to raise the bar, drive sales and elevate the consumer experience. He’s not talking foie gras and truffle oil, just enhancing the quality and value of existing core products, the purchasing experience, and the concessions environment.

And based on a trial in the East Stand of the English Premiership’s Tottenham Hotspur FC, Elliott’s adamant it’s a concept that delivers. “Our Frank’s Original New York Streetdogs, The Pie Factory Pies and deli concepts (including salads) were launched at Spurs last autumn, and as well

as being well received by fans, have produced an 18% increase in total cash takings,” he reveals. In fact, the branded hot dog sold 28% more than the existing product available elsewhere within White Hart Lane. “I’ve got this vision and I know I’m on the right road,” Elliott concludes. “It’s going to take a bit of time, but I’m going to get there.” That could be sooner than he thinks: the concept is now being rolled out at Stoke City’s Britannia Stadium, Ipswich Town’s Portman Road, as well as Rotherham United’s soon-to-be-completed New York Stadium.

Elliott being inspired by the US model, if it’s true that when the USA sneezes, everyone else catches a cold, what else does Richard Dobransky, vice president of Food and Beverage at Delaware North Companies Sportservice, believe might filter through in the future? “I think someday, we’ll probably see a stadium where the entire operation is all-inclusive,” says the 25-year veteran of the catering industry. “We’ve introduced all-inclusive experiences in some of our facilities, such as the Red Bull Arena and the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey – everything is included in the ticket price, your meal, some drinks. No cash ever exchanges hands.”

Despite the fact that some guests could potentially be paying more overall than they would have done purchasing from ‘the cart’, Dobransky insists that because there’s no money coming out of their pockets at the game, psychologically they feel like they’re getting value for money. Such a strategy could provide benefits for stadium owners, too. “If, for instance, you have an inventory of tickets you’re not able to sell – or you have an area of the stadium that’s not selling – if you package it with food and beverage, and maybe throw in some parking and/or other retail component, that’s an easier way to sell those tickets.”

Clearly the catering experience in stadia is evolving, but fans are becoming ever-more discerning. “The experience is unrecognisable to what it was even five years ago – and we’ve seen some phenomenal results,” accepts Robert Read. “But I still look at them and think they’re not as good as they could be. But that’s a wonderful opportunity, isn’t it? You have a captive audience ready to put their money into your hand; you’ve just got to work out how to deliver what they want and take that money off them. That’s a nice problem.” ■