



NEWS & TRENDS

10 onsite dining predictions for 2022

After nearly two years of pandemic-imposed restrictions and adjustments, here are 10 trends we expect to impact onsite dining programs in the coming year.

Mike Buzalka | Dec 14, 2021

In a few months, we'll see the two-year anniversary of the start of the most transformative event in recent history, superseding even 9-11 and the 2008 stock market crash in the impact it has had, and will continue to have, on onsite dining programs, not to mention just about everything else. That event of course is the

emergence of the COVID-19 coronavirus in March 2020, which forced shutdowns and social restrictions that continue in some form to this day.

For the various markets that constitute the onsite dining universe, the impacts of COVID were devastating, forcing some such as sports/recreation concessions and conference/convention center catering to come to a complete halt while most others saw steep declines in business. The advent of vaccines early this year has allowed a mitigation of restrictions, though new virus variants may threaten that easing.

Nevertheless, most observers seem to anticipate a continued crawl back to some semblance of “normal” in the coming year and it is on that assumption that we base the following trend predictions...



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1. The ever-evolving pandemic continues

The past year has seen a gradual easing of lockdowns and mandates but don't be fooled. With the parade of COVID variants that have been emerging combined with concerns about vaccines' effectiveness to combat them and lingering societal anxieties about personal safety, any full return to pre-pandemic “normal” is not likely in 2022, though neither is a return to full lockdown mode...



2. But restrictions will continue to ease

That being said, a slow return to pre-pandemic practices such as self-serve bars and full occupancy dining rooms can be expected, something that is already occurring in some parts of the country to varying extents.



3. Labor usage will evolve

Pandemic-related concerns and various demographic/social factors will continue to constrict the labor pool in 2022, meaning that operators will have to become more efficient with how and where they allocate the labor they have, even as that labor will have more leverage in deciding working conditions, hours and compensation.



4. Customer counts will be down

This is already happening in B&I, where the prospect of full-scale office returns remains an open question, but the phenomenon also extends to the college and K-12 markets, where demographic decreases combined with home schooling/remote learning alternatives are reducing the overall in-person student pool, and in healthcare, where growing telehealth options erode the number of onsite visits to facilities, in turn reducing the potential customer base for the retail dining program.



5. Automated service points will proliferate

As labor remains scarce—and becomes more expensive when it is available—operators are likely to turn increasingly to emerging technologies like smart fridges, automated retail outlets, high-tech vending units and robotic food stations to provide foodservice, especially at times and in places where manned outlets are economic non-starters.



6. Alternate business niches such as off-premise open up

During the height of the pandemic, operators found ways to reach remote customers, most prominently with K-12 programs developing curbside pickup and even home delivery to reach remote learners. Meanwhile, some B&I operators also dabbled with take-home meals and even off-premise delivery to reach client employees working from home, while healthcare facilities have begun exploring the provision of meals to discharged patients and even sports concessionaires developed meal kits that allow fans watching events at home to enjoy ballpark/stadium favorites. As onsite customer counts lag, look for more operations to explore alternative business niches where extra revenue might be generated.



7. Remote order and ghost kitchens are here to stay

Remote ordering exploded during the pandemic as the preferred method of contact with foodservice providers in both the commercial and onsite markets, and there's no reason to think it will regress even if the pandemic comes to a full halt, as the apps providing this service are now in place and customers are increasingly comfortable with them. Ghost kitchens—foodservice operations that serve exclusively as production and pickup outlets for remote orders—are a natural extension of the remote order culture and can be expected to proliferate accordingly.



8. More robots!

It seems like every week brings news of one more college campus rolling out meal delivery robots, but that's just the tip of the spear of automated delivery as major restaurant and retail operators experiment not only with robots but full-size unmanned vehicles and even airborne drones. This is an area of technology that can be expected to evolve rapidly in response to strong market pressures.



9. Supply chain issues will recede

Markets usually find a way around obstacles if the self-interest—read, profits—is strong enough, and the betting here is that that is what will happen with the current supply chain snags. Yes, truckers are in short supply, ships are stacked up off the California coast and manufacturers are having a hell of a time getting the ingredients and the workers they need to keep up with demand, but none of this is insurmountable. Look for increased innovation in the products manufacturers produce, the ways distributors evolve scheduling and the ways operators place orders and receive shipments. By the way, one positive that has come out of the supply chain crisis is a growing appreciation of local suppliers whose products are more readily at hand.



10. Food price increases will continue

A combination of pent-up demand, escalating fuel prices that impact delivery costs and increased labor, ingredient and production costs at the supplier end all mean a likely continuance and even escalation of food prices across the board through 2022.

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