

Cultural experience

Foodservice consultants aren't just about slotting the right equipment into the available space, as **Rudy Miick** FCSI explains to Howard Riell, they can help with those intangibles that help a company thrive

David Owen, president of De La Mer Fresh Fish Market in Canada, wanted to accomplish several things as 2018 began – including improving employee retention, growing his company and burnishing his brand.

For guidance, he reached out to veteran consultant Rudy Miick FCSI, founder and president of The Miick Companies in Boulder, Colorado, US. The results have been impressive. The decade-old company, which operates four locations in and around Toronto, Ontario, has quadrupled its profits, according to Owen. In addition, employee retention is up an impressive 80%.

Owen and his managers have also “defined expectations for our crew,” which he says “has allowed us to take those individuals who are invested in the company to the next level.” It has also allowed those individuals “for whom De La Mer is not the right place to be easily

recognized, and to either select out or be let go.”

“In Canada, or at least in Toronto, there have been some fairly strong economic headwinds for corporate growth, and we have generally held flat in the face of these. Our profit growth is from a better understanding of our purchasing cycle,” he explains.

Three desires

De La Mer is a fish and seafood market whose “main focus is fish and seafood education to our customers, while supplying them with an abundant choice of sustainable, responsible and high quality product,” Owen explains. He describes the décor as “clean, contemporary, classic seaside.”

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The per-basket average sale is CAN \$26 to \$29.

Owen and Miick first talked in late March of 2018. In May, they met in person when Owen attended a leadership communication retreat in Chicago that Miick was facilitating. “From there our conversations focused on his three desires: to stop staff turnover, to grow his company and expand his brand,” Miick recalls. “David knew he wanted to grow his company. He knew

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he wanted to cut costs and raise revenue. He knew he needed help with management development.”

More than that, Owen “had a sense there was a different way to grow and lead his company than the traditional command and control top-down model. What he didn’t know was how to do this.”

Miick was asked to refine the culture and brand of the business, facilitate strategy, and build systems and structure that would achieve defined goals. It

was accomplished in a way he describes as “fiscally nimble,” implementing anticipatory costing systems supported by decision-making and communication systems “guided by defined purpose, vision and values used as active tools themselves. This is where the story really begins.”

A comprehensive operations/systems assessment was completed and presented to the board in July of 2018. Work began in earnest in September. >



“Our method is consistent in process and the steps we take regardless of client,” Miick explains. “One might think this consistent method would create a cookie-cutter outcome. The opposite is true. Outcome from our consistent methodology provides a unique solution for each of our clients. De La Mer has their own unique culture and interpersonal dynamics. Their brand experience is guided by their values and unique sense of purpose.”

Miick believes that culture equals brand. “Imagine an applicant or guest reading a piece of marketing material about the company,” he says. “Typically this is called ‘branding’ at a deep level, or ‘marketing/advertising’ at a more superficial level.

The applicant is hired expecting the stories of the brand experience of being a team member to be ‘x.’ The guest reads the ad, forms an impression and decides to try the brand. The experience for the guest either

matches or does not match the marketing piece. You and I know this guest experience match as being the brand experience.”

“Rudy led us through a three-day exercise with purpose, and then with values,” Owen recalls. “We took a cross-section of the company – two from ownership, two from management, two from crew. We worked from our personal passions, finding those things that were shared and then taking those shared elements and moving to a corporate purpose.”

At that point, Owen reflects: “I had to give up control for this process to be effective. This purpose is our ‘why’ we do what we do. We then took the same team and defined our values; these are more guides on ‘how’

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we do what we do. This, again, was a three-day process with much discussion on exactly what these values would be.”

Employee focus

De La Mer’s employee retention jumped, according to Miick, primarily as a result of three strategies:

- **Coaching to the positive**
“That means finding actions done right by his team and celebrating those in the moment, and of



Top: The Danforth Avenue store in Toronto. All the stores sell sauces and other accompaniments. Above: Rudy Miick FCSI



course correcting those actions that are not. The opposite of bosses policing all the things that are done wrong.”

● **Defining excellence**

“We’ve taken away the concept of common sense and defined a shared definition of excellence in every position and job in the company,” Miick says. “Further, excellence is translated into behaviors that work and can be coached.” Instead of compliments or criticism, team members are given detailed feedback that builds on the positive and takes performance further. “Instead of being punished, team members are celebrated, and come to managers asking for feedback on how they can be better.”

● **An inspired workplace**

Miick sees three attitude alternatives in a workplace, each created by the leadership behaviors within the brand/culture. “Fear equals ‘do the job

or else.’ Neutral equals ‘it’s a job.’ Inspiration equals ‘I am inspired by what we do and I perform at a higher level.’”

Guided training

Training was also revamped. “De La Mer has such an abundance of fish knowledge – filleting and handling skill, safety, sanitation, and environmental awareness, as well as guest service – that bringing a team member to expert level could take months,” says Miick. “The old process made it easy for trainers to be inconsistent due to the abundance of information, coupled with the issue that team members may or may not be motivated to learn due to the interview, hiring and coaching process in place.”

Now, training is grounded by purpose, guided by values and supported with definitions of excellence for every role in the company. As Miick points out: “The training model incorporates experiential models that make

it impossible for trainers to misinterpret or omit.” Staffers also keep a score card for each training session that guides both trainer and trainee toward mastery and a process of coaching positive outcomes.

“The culture of the company drives the team-member experience of ‘true or not true,’ ‘real or not real,’” according to Miick. “At the deepest level, the guest experience is the same. Culture drives the brand experience of great service, food, décor, safe, sanitary, excellent or average – or not. Culture actually drives brand, not marketing. Thus, culture equals brand.”

Owen agrees that culture equals brand “because our corporate culture comes through in absolutely everything we do for our customers. If our corporate culture is vague and ill-defined, then the experience of the customer will also be inconsistent and dependent on who is working, which is not a brand experience.” ■

