

Catering

In his third and final article Turpin Smale Catering Consultants' Charles Manners looks at outsourcing and volunteers

Food for thought

3. Outsourcing and using volunteers

The operation of a café can be challenging and time consuming, so outsourcing is tempting. If managed well and the right catering partner is found it can make a real difference to the visitor experience. There are pros and cons – what it is not is an abdication of the responsibility to manage and integrate the catering offer into the visitor experience.

Going down the outsourced route results in a loss of control, although a good commercially-driven operator who understands the museum's culture can add real value. We are always reluctant to advise museums to enter into long contracts of five years+ in exchange for the offer of capital (often much needed). Whilst this may well be the only solution,

committing to a partner whose strategic direction could be different and unaligned with the museum's in five years' time is a real risk.

The growth of artisan cafés has resulted in more commercially sound operators seeking to expand; add in the number of contract caterers and a good number of potential partners are in the mix. But when there are sales of less than £300,000 per year it can be difficult to find a commercial partner; this is where the local operator may be the solution.

Sadly, we see many contracts where the potential sales were over promised (visitor numbers), and when you add in the contractor's optimistic view and sales which don't deliver the expected commercial outcomes for both parties, antagonism can result. Realistic sales forecasts and commission levels, with a well-managed set of key performance indicators (KPI's) and regular client/contractor meetings will ensure the outsourced solution works for both parties.

At smaller museums and visitor attractions where catering sales do not commercially allow either an outsourced catering offer or a commercial in-house offer, we are seeing the increasing use of volunteers to help in both catering and retail areas. Whilst volunteers have been a core component at many museums their use in catering has been limited, but this is changing. Providing they have the appropriate food hygiene training, volunteers can be a welcome addition to any in-house team and can complement paid staff.

Ensuring that visitors know from the menu that all profits go to the museum, and the staff is a mix of paid and volunteers is always a positive!

Getting the balance right in outsourcing and/or the use of volunteers depends on the culture of the organisation and its values, aims and objectives. However, in an era when (local) government support is reducing, and competition for visitors' time and their pounds is increasing, all options need to be considered.

www.turpinsmale.co.uk