

Training on the Go – A direct line to food service profits?

Several years ago, the Peninsula Yacht Club was selected to be the club to implement the Hospitality Resources International Training on the Go (TOG) Program. Initially, the TOG program was met with some resistance from the front of house staff. They felt that the program was another monotonous program whereby the dining room managers preach F&B mechanics to them for what seemed like hours. Upon the staff's recommendation, I changed the program's delivery and made it involve the servers and bartenders more than the dining room managers.

In this new delivery, the servers studied a pre-determined module and then they were charged with presenting it to the rest of the staff. This was the key to making the program work. Now, servers would become teachers and would instruct their "class" in the pre-shift meetings. There was no way to avoid having to teach a module as we required busboys, hostesses, servers and bartenders alike to instruct a class twice a month.

At first, the restaurant staff was enthralled by the alcoholic beverage information, especially the histories of liquors and wines. This is the easiest part to teach because the 18-24 year olds seem to have an interest in learning about alcohol. After they taught the beverage portion, we focused on foods and specifically our restaurant's menu. With the help of our chef, we were able to discuss the history of our menu choices, which wines would complement which entrees, and how to sell the daily features. After the beverage and food modules were taught, we moved on to other important issues such as the steps of service, flow of the dining room, recovery techniques, etc. In the end, 94 modules were taught over a 16-month period. Some of the more important modules were repeated. After completing the modules in order, we have now begun to teach them in random order and allowing the staff to choose the module they wish to teach.

Once the TOG program was instituted and the bugs were worked out, several amazing things happened in our restaurant. The first noticeable change was in the demeanor and confidence of the front of house staff. Almost instantly, they became more comfortable discussing foods and beverages with members and guests and with making recommendations. Their newly gained knowledge of the preparations and histories of the food and beverages helped them to become more confident in their ability to answer members' questions. They looked forward to being asked about the history or preparation of certain items and the social interaction that was created when these questions were asked.

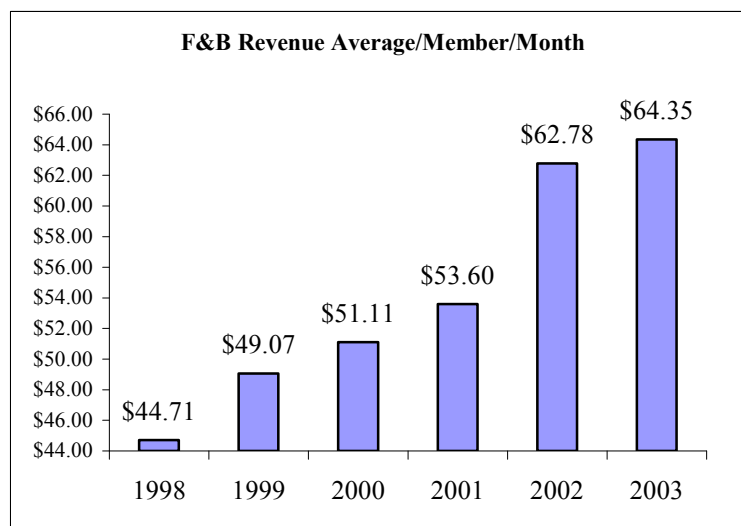
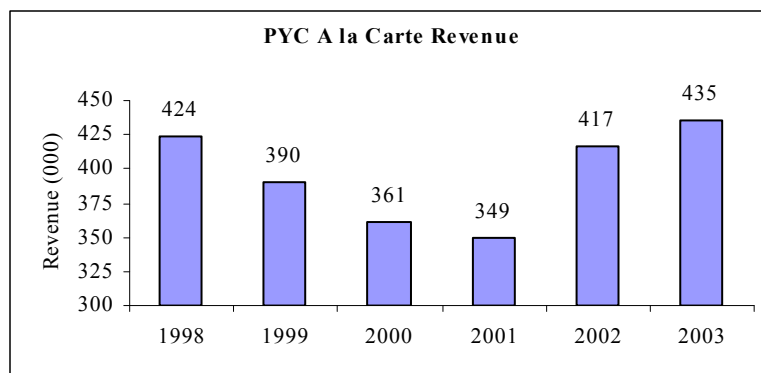
The second noticeable change was that our front of house staff turnover rate declined. Our servers enjoyed coming to work and were not as apt to move on to another restaurant opportunity. The restaurant staff felt more a part of the club and they enjoyed getting to know members more personally through their social interaction. The staff no longer felt they were 'going through the motions while waiting for the next new restaurant to open in the area.'

The third and most noticeable change was in the number of appetizers, desserts, and after-dinner drinks sold during the dinner shifts. Just by gaining knowledge of these items, servers were able to discuss daily specials, suggestively sell at every table they were working. The increase in the a la carte average check was immediate. The servers' confidence created an aura of professionalism and also caused a competitive nature in the restaurant. Personal bets were being made to see who could up-sell the most wine or desserts. Managers started offering a complimentary dessert to the server who sold the most after-dinner drinks. The front of house staff loved the competition and it drove our sales to levels not seen in the past. Of course, revenues followed.

To answer the question in the title of this article; “Is the TOG program a direct line to restaurant profits?” I offer the following evidence:

At the start of implementation, the club’s restaurant was experiencing a four-year decline in a la carte business. This decline was, at the time, blamed on the poor economy before and after September 11th and a declining membership level. In hindsight, these were only excuses for a more prominent problem.

Although the club’s membership level was declining, the average food and beverage revenue per member was holding steady at the 5-year average and the cover counts did not show a decline either. Therefore, members were using the restaurant at a consistent rate in 1999, 2000, and 2001 up until 9/11. What we noticed when looking at the revenue data was that the average check per member had declined drastically. The data told us that members were continuing to dine in the restaurant at a steady rate, but they were spending less on each visit. Our a la carte menu prices had not fluctuated during this period, so it led me to believe that we were doing something different in the dining room or, as I found out later, we were not doing some things that we had done in the past.



The TOG program was started in October of 2001. Almost immediately, the average check increased and the number of appetizers and desserts increased as well. Soon after, our alcoholic beverage sales increased, especially wine by the bottle, which shot up 200%. In 2002, the program really took off. By the spring of 2002, the up-selling competitions had begun and revenue increases were seen in appetizers, daily specials, desserts, after-dinner drinks, wine by the bottle and wine by the glass. For the 2002 year, the average F&B revenue per member increased 15% to \$62.78 per month. The trend continued in 2003 with revenues continuing to increase in 2004. It is without question that implementing the Training on the Go program has had and continues to have a direct positive effect of restaurant revenues at the Peninsula Yacht Club. If you think this program could help your club, visit the Hospitality Resources International website and download the TOG program. It is a sure fire way to increase your restaurant’s revenues.

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