

Streamlined food prep helps local chain expand

Written by By Claudia Infante Finance New Mexico
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When Albuquerque-based Dion's restaurant turned its entrepreneurial vision toward larger markets outside New Mexico in 2014, owners of the privately owned chain thought it was a good time to review operations with an eye to improving efficiency in its 20 existing outlets.

So Dion's asked the New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership to offer its expert assessment of how the restaurant was preparing and serving food and to suggest how it could modify the process to give the restaurant more value for its efforts. That process, known as value-stream mapping, is a comprehensive management approach to improving productivity and maximizing profitability.

Restaurant managers hoped to use the information they obtained to design a kitchen layout with a pared-down footprint that maximized space and used labor most efficiently to meet growing customer demand. By standardizing its approach to customer service, the restaurant hoped to minimize the risk it faced competing well beyond its home base.

Mapping manufacturing

Over Dion's 38-year history, the company experimented with different layouts depending on where each restaurant was located. Early restaurants were frequently found in strip malls, but later incarnations were free-standing buildings with pickup windows.

Building layouts weren't uniform companywide, nor was the process of preparing and serving food. Given this variability, MEP experts visited three different stores over four days to observe operations in the food-preparation areas and to map out each step in meal production and delivery.

MEP's innovation directors found that the stores followed the same general procedures, even though the actual execution of these steps differed at each site depending on kitchen and counter layout. The counter person took an order and physically delivered the ticket to the appropriate "cell" or work area, depending on whether the customer wanted a whole pizza, a salad, a sub sandwich or an individual pizza slice. Workers then made the product, and a server delivered it to the customer.

Opportunities for change

Creating this map for Dion's allowed MEP experts to analyze what worked and what didn't in each restaurant setting and to suggest areas for improvement.

After they completed the review, MEP's innovation directors met with members of Dion's management team to discuss the findings and offer optimization opportunities. Among many other suggestions, they encouraged Dion's to centralize its phone network, especially in the salad prep area, and to standardize the sub sandwich/pizza slice area to reduce cross-traffic, bottlenecks and congestion — the kinds of obstacles that were pinching production during busy hours.

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Another suggestion was to improve the ticket delivery system: Instead of having an employee run tickets to each station, Dion's could use cables or a point-of-sale system to minimize the risk of employees colliding with one another and to save time.

Employees performing the day-to-day activities are able to offer a unique perspective. MEP's innovation directors encouraged Dion's managers to send all employees to MEP's training classes so they would understand the process and contribute to discussions. MEP also offered to work with the restaurant to evaluate its commissary layouts.

"Value-stream mapping is just one of the tools MEP uses to help companies change mindsets and maximize efficiency," said Jennifer Sinsabaugh, center director in New Mexico.

For more information about NM MEP, visit newmexicomep.org or call (505) 262-0921.

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