

THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

Casino experts share tips for controlling buffet costs.

By BILL SCHWARTZ

Buffets are an integral part of the casino business, and casino operators focus a great deal of attention on them, always working to reduce costs. While buffets may not be as big a part of the overall hotel business, they are widely used for breakfast. I talked with a few casino operators to get their buffet insights.

Our experts are Marty Miles (MM), president of Casino Food & Beverage Solutions, LLC, and formerly the corporate VP of F&B for Harrah's Entertainment, Inc.; Victor Gonzalez (VG), executive director of F&B for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's Casino of the Sun and Casino del Sol near Tucson, Arizona; and Russ Burbank (RB), a consultant and former chief operating officer for Casino Arizona, which consists of two fairly large casinos near Phoenix. The three share some of their secrets for reducing buffet costs:

VG: "The manager or chef at the end of shift is key. They need to make sure production is reduced properly. Much of the waste happens at the end of the day."

RB: "Use themes and rotating menus. Proteins that have not been fired can be used in subsequent buffets with a different preparation consistent with the theme."

MM: "I worked with smallwares manufacturers to develop hot pan inserts of varying depth. We started the buffet with shallow pans, moved to deep pans during heavy times, and then moved back to shallow pans near the end of day. Our pans still looked full, and we provided the same variety without all the waste associated with over-preparation to fill pans."

VG: "Use large drink cups to increase liquid intake, resulting in less food intake and less server labor to keep drinks filled. It is also more convenient for the guest."

RB: "Carvers must be trained to cut small slices. One carver might get only seven to eight slices out of a roast, while another could get 14."

MM: "Avoid the use of cookies, whole fruit, individual yogurts, or anything with no mess that can be consumed later. I've watched

people stuff these items into their purses at their table or sometimes right at the line."

VG: "Serve shrimp with the shell on. People take less if they have to work harder."

RB: "Prep known quantities in advance. Keep track of prep, portions, and fired quantities. Keep waste on the line to a minimum by using smaller containers and reducing batch sizes as closing nears. Use excess for employee dining on the same day if possible."

MM: "Consider using a cook-chill approach. Recipes can be prepared weeks in advance and blast-frozen, reducing labor costs and product availability issues and allowing for a ready supply that can be re-thermalized as needed."

All three agree that forecasting is critical. Planned, operated, and controlled properly, it is possible for buffets to not only accomplish the objectives set by management, but to do so without additional, unnecessary loss. ■

Bill Schwartz is president of System Concepts, Inc. (SCI). Based in Scottsdale Arizona, SCI is the developer of the FOOD-TRAK Food and Beverage Management System. He can be reached at bills@foodtrak.com.

