



Evolution of food services in the post-Covid-19 era

Saturday, 06 June, 2020

Karan Totlani

The Covid-19 attack on humanity was unprecedented and hence the world was totally unprepared to tackle this invisible enemy. Large scale corporates, manufacturing facilities, schools and universities had to be suddenly shut down, healthcare institutions reduced to emergency services only; with every administration gaining time to understand the pandemic better and formulate a strategy to get human life and the economy back on track. Today, as the organisations slowly move towards reopening their doors, health and hygiene have become one of the biggest priorities; and so has food.

Food services cater to both categories of organisations – with and without an on-site kitchen facility. The considerations for each will vary greatly now, considering the threats posed by the pandemic and the guidelines presented by FSSAI.

Organisations with on-site kitchens

There is a complete lifecycle that food undergoes before it reaches the employee's plate inside an organisation's cafeteria. Vegetables and livestock are sourced from local farms; then transported to the on-site kitchens where food is prepared by veteran chefs. However, to function in the new normal, extra safety measures will now be required to be brought into the picture.

Needless to say, the entire supply chain would have to be tracked to see if the food sourced is safe also comes from places free from the effects of the pandemic, apart from being fresh and of the best quality. Once it reaches the kitchen, the raw food material will have to be disinfected thoroughly before being cooked.

Apart from this, the kitchen infrastructure must be redesigned to meet hygiene and social distancing norms as directed by FSSAI. The kitchen staff has to be regularly monitored for high temperatures or any other symptoms of infection, personal hygiene, wellbeing and also food handling. Food has to be cooked in smart kitchens that limit human contact to the minimum. Due to supply chain constraints and staggered working hours for staff, it goes without saying that there will be a strong need to customise the menu.

Customised dishes that can be accommodated in packaged meals will assume more importance as employees can avail them in a contactless manner and even carry it to their own work area for consumption or for that matter, consume it on their way back home. In case, employees consume their meals in the cafeteria, then utmost caution must be

maintained while serving and picking up the food. The cafeteria design itself must ensure social distancing. Additionally, metal packaging should meet sustainability goals.

Since contactless delivery will be the focus, digitalising most processes will be the priority. From ordering food to delivery, everything will have to be possible through an app. Cash payment will need to be minimised; with virtual meal cards providing the desired solution.

Apart from meals that are cooked daily in the kitchen, food will also need to be available in smart vending machines that have temperature-controlled units to provide both hot and cold meals. 'Grab and go' packages will also be useful for employees in a hurry to reach a client meeting or home, providing intermittent meal solutions.

Organisations without on-site kitchens

There are certain constraints due to which some organisations do not have on-site kitchens. Reasons vary from employee size to lack of kitchen infrastructure. In the post-Covid-19 era, organisations will need to reevaluate their meal solutions. Given the fact that therein the increased focus on health and hygiene and there will be an enormous amount of employee anxiety around eating outside. To make employees feel at ease and offer them nutritious, balanced meals which are cooked in a hygienic environment will be a pre-requisite. It will offer great inducement, rebuild trust, and boost confidence among employees working from the office or in remote environments. This is an incredibly important step in the current scenario.

Therefore, in addition to smart vending machines and grab and go offers, organisations will need to look at food delivery through cloud kitchens that are designed to meet the guidelines prescribed by FSSAI.

Leveraging expertise to provide quality food services

With expertise and experience, the industry has been able to overcome many such challenges akin to Covid-19 and evolve food services to meet the requirements of most organisations. In the present context, the industry has adapted many solutions to ensure that organisations can rely on them for quality food that meets stringent guidelines necessary for guarding against the pandemic.

Providers have ensured that on-site kitchens are HSE approved and will be deep cleaned and disinfected before they resume their food services. The staff has already been trained to operate under these unusual conditions. They will be strictly monitored for health, hygiene, and wellbeing on a regular basis. They would also be required to wear face masks and gloves as a regular practice. To reduce overloading in the kitchen and minimise cross-contamination, some providers will have a specially curated menu, fortified with immunity boosters keeping employee wellness in mind. All food materials will be disinfected and sanitised before storage or cooking.

To ensure contactless food delivery, the key players of the industry will provide boxed meals from both on-site and off-site kitchens. Aside from this, for employees working from home, cloud kitchens will ensure that packaged meals reach these employees at the right time, satisfying all the hygiene, social distancing, and contactless delivery guidelines.

In addition to this, a local emergency contact team is also being set in place in many large scale food service providers to coordinate and monitor these guidelines and ensure that everything is being done in tandem with the requirements of FSSAI. This team has been trained to follow general Covid-19 protocol and be prepared to tackle suspected complications.

These measures are incredibly critical to ensure the wellbeing of customers and the working staff. The key players of the industry have understood the importance of adhering to these guidelines and have done everything possible to ensure that they are able to provide hygienic, safe food to their customers.

