

THE VALUE OF DATA

As I walked through the client's kitchen one morning I was surprised to find a trash can holding some 70 croissants, thrown away after the breakfast setup was cleaned up. Since they didn't look burnt or in some other way defective I wondered what could've gone wrong. It seemed like a lot of food to be throwing out. I decided to check with the chef to see if I could find a reason for this.

"Yeah," said the chef when I asked him, "some mornings are like that. I usually bake about a hundred croissants every morning, and some days they all disappear, and some other days are like today, when nobody seems to touch them. I can't figure it out. It's not like they're bad or anything..."

To the chef it was a mystery, and for him it was easiest just to live with it. Some days they eat all of them, some days they don't. To him it was like the weather, something you cannot do anything about.

If you're a manager, you can't allow too many mysteries in your life. Your job is to take the uncertainty out of situations, to understand the causes that lie behind events. There must be a reason why croissants disappear one day and seem to lie untouched on another day.

When I worked as a Food & Beverage manager I had noticed certain patterns in breakfast food consumption. Sometimes lots of cereals would be eaten; sometimes it was the baked goods. Sometimes we had to brew several extra pots of coffee, on another days we needed to bring more hot water and tea bags.

Throwing out food was hurting my budget and I wanted to find the reasons behind these variations so I could manage them. I decided to hang out in the breakfast area for a few days and collect some data. It didn't take me all that long to see what was happening: breakfast food consumption patterns were determined by the nationality of our guests.

Peter Houniet & Associates

CONSULTANTS TO THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

In a nutshell, here is what I found: Frenchmen eat _____ and very little _____. Do you have a lot of American guests? Stock up on _____ and don't worry about _____. Englishmen like to have _____ for breakfast and don't seem to go for a lot of _____.

Your situation may not be the same, but for me, what worked in that situation was to pay close attention to the breakdown of nationalities of our guests. My chef didn't automatically bake 100 croissants every morning, as a matter of fact, nothing was automatic after I made my discovery. Every morning's breakfast preparation was to be different, based on the information I collected the afternoon before.

I sat down with the chef and went over the numbers with him. I told him what I had found out and asked him what he thought of the idea of adjusting food production according to the numbers I had collected.

Eventually, it became a routine. Each morning, the chef would find a memo in his in-box, telling him how many guests we had, and how our guest list broke down in terms of ages, groups or couples, nationalities, etc. From that the chef would be able to calculate the food requirements. The amount of food we threw out each morning was reduced significantly. Every hotel that's been running for a while is sitting on a wealth of information. The key to success lies in the details, and the details reside in the data.