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## Managing the Restaurant Opening Process: Why You Can't Afford To Lose Control & How To Do It

by Chris Tripoli

**As I walked into my client's restaurant that was one week from opening, I found myself stepping over a man installing the marble floor entry, dodging the delivery people bringing supplies to the bar, and watching the painter touch up a wall while someone else reached around him to hang up the artwork.**



I couldn't help but notice the ladders in the middle of the dining room or the workers installing the sound system and hanging light fixtures.

As I greeted the manager, he explained how behind their deadlines everybody seemed to be and that he had to keep pushing the workers to complete their jobs and be gone in two days so he could clean up and practice before opening. We were interrupted by the landscape deliveryman who informed us that he wasn't able to install the front areas because of the weather. The manager seemed overly stressed at this point, and to add "insult to injury" the millworker announced that the large corner booth didn't fit and would need to go back to the shop to get modified.

Just then, we heard a loud crash coming from the kitchen where we learned that two men had bumped into the kitchen equipment installer and dropped the large mirror that was to hang above the bar ... Ouch! Welcome to another day in restaurant opening hell. If it sounds scary, it is. Instead of quaking in fear, start planning — now. In this article, we will look at some lessons I've learned about managing the opening process, and I'll provide a couple of forms to assist with your organizational efforts. First, take a deep breath...

### **Lesson No. 1:** **Don't Try to Make Up for Lost Time During the Final Steps of Construction ...**

If you push the building tradesmen, it is likely to cause errors that can hurt your first impression on opening day, and you only get one chance to open. Why is it that we hurry and try to get so many different things done at the same time toward the end of the project, and we allow much more time for trades to complete their work earlier in the project?

I have noticed that the concrete workers, carpentry framers, mechanical installers, electricians and plumbers receive more time during the early and middle portions of the construction schedule than the carpet installers, millworkers, marble and tile workers, painters, and décor team are allowed toward the end of the schedule.

The two main reasons this happens with great regularity are:

- ▼ Owners get quite eager to open as they get close to the end.
- ▼ Owners try to make up for lost time earlier to meet a designated opening day.

So, is there a method to the madness? Is it possible to avoid some of the last-minute craziness? Can we manage our openings more like the engineer of a train and less like the caboose trying to catch up? The answer is a resounding "yes." Restaurant openings may be far from an exact science ... but we have come a long way from throwing darts at dates on a board.

## **Lesson No. 2:** **Managing the Opening Process Isn't About Being Scared ...**

It's all about being prepared. Bob Herbage, veteran restaurant architect with Hospitality Design Group in San Antonio, Texas, reminds us that with proper planning, budgeting and scheduling done at the beginning of the project ... we stand a far better chance of having an organized "on-time" opening. "Startup restaurant operators should be less in a hurry to start so that they can be better prepared and more organized," Herbage says. "Decisions made during the concept development and design planning stages go a long way in helping the implementation stage occur on time and on budget."

Much like making the most of your garden begins with preparing the soil ... making the most of your restaurant opening begins with preparing the plans. Months before you plan to open, you lay the foundation for its success.

**The first step in this process is called the concept development stage.** This initial design stage is where you define the size, layout, and look and feel of your restaurant. Preliminary decisions made during this stage help shape the cost, degree of difficulty, and length of schedule required for successfully developing and opening your restaurant concept. During this stage you will have determined your style of service, preliminary kitchen and bar layout, as well as menu, small wares and tabletop items (glassware, dishes, flatware). The preliminary sketches completed during this stage form the framework for the more detailed drawings and specifications done in the next step. Concept development normally takes four to six weeks to complete.

**The next phase is to determine the design, planning and necessary contracts.** During this stage many events occur that affect the opening schedule of your restaurant. The architect-designer develops the design of the interior, floor plan, elevations and preliminary kitchen and bar equipment on CAD (computer-assisted design). This process allows for greater detail and provides accurate scale required for building and budgeting. Graphic design of logo and specialty décor, as well as initial menu layout and design are completed during this stage to prepare the operator for the time and cost required to complete these items.

Preliminary review of uniforms, POS (point-of-sale), phone, security, and sound systems is done during this stage so that locations can be included in the design for cost and schedule estimating. It is important to remember when selecting items that each decision you make has a quality, cost and schedule consequence. Although all three are equally important, each decision only gets to include two. For example, if the millworker that you specify must be of a very high quality and you need it quickly, it will not be available at a reasonable cost. However, if you have specified used kitchen equipment, then you will receive reasonable cost, within your schedule timetable but at a lower quality level than if you specified new. Balancing the quality required with the cost you can afford is one of the most important considerations you have in managing the opening process.

## **Lesson No. 3:**

## **Do Not Expect Things to be High Quality, Low Cost, and Fast Delivery ...**

If you do, you will forever be disappointed. This stage of design development, contract documents and budget completion provides you with the foundation needed to build a reasonable opening schedule. This stage may take eight to 12 weeks to complete.

A group of first-time restaurant operators from Florida developed a casual sports-theme, full-service, restaurant-and-bar concept and completed the first stage of the opening process (concept development). They tell me the information provided helped them visualize their idea more clearly, and now armed with preliminary data regarding size, layout, cost and schedule, they feel more capable of finding the right location and funding so that they may continue with its development.

Sam Ansara of Wyandotte, Michigan, started his opening process with a location. Choosing a closed restaurant provided certain advantages in cost and timesavings. After developing his concept's menu, design, and opening budget, he was able to put a reasonable schedule together, and four months later, Austin's H.P. Grille opened successfully. He recently celebrated the restaurant's first-year anniversary.

**The third stage of the development process is implementation.** During this step the architect provides you with the final plans and specifications for approval, submittal to the city (or appropriate jurisdiction) for permit and to the contractor(s) for bid and negotiation. Armed with a building permit ... a selected contractor ... completed schedule and budget, you are ready to manage the process.

The final three months of a restaurant are the most intense because during that period design, construction, and operations-related items overlap. It is important to maintain a tight schedule so that you minimize the cost overages that come along with delays. It is equally important to allow reasonable time for items to be correctly completed. For first-time restaurant operators, maintaining this balance may seem like an insurmountable task. With proper information and regular communication the management of this process can be made much easier.

For this reason, we recommend following a planning guide commonly called the "90-day critical path" (critical path refers to the sequence of activities that limit how quickly a project can be completed). See the ["90-Day Preopening Planning Chart"](#) below. The format is known as a "Gantt chart," a scheduling tool used to display the status of a project's tasks. A Gantt chart shows each task's duration as a horizontal line. The ends of the lines correspond to the task's start and end dates. The example included is for a 140-seat full-service casual American Grill restaurant and bar. This restaurant is scheduled to open May 1, 2007.

To best use the 90-day critical path management guide, mark both the week a decision or order is required, and the week the item needs to be delivered. To easily follow the guide, assign tasks to responsible parties, and manage issues as they arise. The ["Restaurant Preopening Weekly Task Sheet"](#) will assist you in this process. Use it as a weekly meeting agenda.

All operational items requiring decisions, orders and deliveries are grouped into categories on the left side of the 90-day critical path planner so that you can easily identify items needing attention and mark the week that action is required.

## **Using the 90-Day Preopening Planning Chart**

In this chart, for example, "Furniture and Accessories" requires action to select and order decorative items, light fixtures and audio-visual equipment during weeks three and four to have

them delivered when construction is scheduled to install them during weeks nine and 11.

Restaurant and bar equipment is commonly installed by electricians and plumbers contracted by the general contractor. In our chart, this equipment should be installed during weeks nine and 10 so it becomes mandatory to have the order made during week three to allow sufficient time. The hoods are to be installed earlier (week seven) because that is when mechanical contractors are on site doing their work. Typically the hoods are hung by the same contractor doing the air conditioning and heat, and need to be completed before ceilings are in.

Another interesting and commonly overlooked item is the system-related equipment (POS, security, telephone, sound and video). These items require installation of cable during the week before the contractor covers the walls and then a second installation of the materials one to two weeks before opening.

Nonconstruction-related items such as marketing, menu development, staff selection, uniforms and beginning inventories, need to be scheduled on this same planning guide to maintain project coordination. With only one place to look each week to see the dates requiring action, you are less likely to miss something. Including the small, easy-to-forget items like extermination, making extra sets of keys, picking up required license or permits and petty cash, help you avoid making a small mistake that could have large consequences.

Managing the opening process, using this 90-day planner and task sheet won't eliminate the chance of mistakes happening (wrong product getting delivered), but it will allow you the ability and opportunity to better handle them when they do.

## **Communication is Vital**

As with any other procedure, communication is the key to successful execution. It is extremely important to manage the opening process of your restaurant by employing weekly meetings (by phone or in person) with your design, construction, and management team. Preview the weeks ahead as well as review the one recently completed to be certain that all items get discussed and all team members are headed in the same direction.

Knowing what construction may need from you at least a week in advance will help you to keep them on schedule. Having the designer know what construction may require one or more weeks ahead will help them greatly with maintaining their schedule for finishes, décor, fixtures, and artwork. Do not be afraid to ask questions of any member of your team because even though this may be your first restaurant opening ... it is your restaurant, after all. Remember, opening restaurants isn't about being scared; it's all about being prepared.

[Restaurant Startup & Growth](#)

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## **Restaurant Preopening Weekly Task Sheet**



## 90-Day Preopening Planning Chart

### Restaurant 90-Day Preopening Planning Form

AMERICAN GRILLE		Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Week	Responsible	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Party	
Project Name		2/12	2/19	2/26	3/5	3/12	3/19	3/26	4/2	4/9	4/16	4/23	4/30		
I.	<b>Design and Construction</b>	[Solid black bar]												O P E N	
	<b>Furniture and Accessories</b>														
	- Décor Items														
	- Interior Plants														
	- Lighting														
	- AV Installation														
III.	<b>Restaurant Bar Equipment</b>														
	- Kitchen Installation														
	- Bar Installation														
	- Hoods - Ventilation														
	- P.O.S. Installation														
	- Telephone														
	- Security Alarm														
IV.	<b>Small Wares</b>														
	- Kitchen Supplies														
	- Bar Supplies														
	- Dining Room Supplies														
	- Miscellaneous														
V.	<b>Misc. Equipment</b>														
	- Office Equipment														
	- Office Computer														
	- Furnishings - Supplies														
	- Safe														
VI.	<b>Uniforms &amp; Linens</b>														
	- Uniforms - Managers														
	- Uniforms - Kitchen														
	- Uniforms - Dining														
	- Uniforms - Bar														
	- Uniforms - Host														
	- Other Linen														

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### **Initial Sources: Create Your Own Gantt Charts**

A powerful project management software package with which you can create your own Gantt charts relatively easily is Microsoft Project. It will take a little time to get up to speed on this package; however, if you are not opposed to learning new software applications, this tool can prove invaluable as you plan your opening, events, and other projects with multiple tasks and a critical path.

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