



Centerplate Stir Concepts in Hospitality



SPOTLIGHT



The Gospel of John Sergi

Centerplate Chief Design Officer preaches hospitality and customer trust

by DAVE BROOKS



Centerplate's talented team of chefs are trained in the tastes of their client venues.

For nearly 20 years, John Sergi has led a small congregation of followers. He had converts and clients from some of the finest sports and entertainment events in the world, but he didn't have the critical mass.

Sergi started working in food at the ripe age of 11 and, over time, had accrued some big time clients like the Wachovia Championship at Quail Hollow (now named after Wells Fargo) and was often a guest lecturer at Cornell's esteemed Hotel School (his alma mater). He had a vision to reinvent the game day experience around hospitality, but he didn't have the scale to make sweeping change.

And then he got a call from Bob Pascal, a friend of Sergi and now chief officer of marketing at Centerplate. Pascal explained that the company had gone private with a new owner

WE DON'T WANT TO WIN AT THE GAME TODAY. WE WANT TO CHANGE THE WAY THE GAME IS PLAYED.” — DES HAGUE

in Kohlberg Associates and a new CEO, a Scottish fellow named Des Hague who had left IHOP to help turn around the giant concessions company.

“We made arrangements to meet during

the U.S. Open” in New York, one of Sergi's clients, Sergi said. “We weren't long into the conversation when Des turned to me and said, ‘I don't want you thinking that we took on Centerplate so we could do a better job than everyone else. We don't want to win at the game today. We want to change the way the game is played.’”

That sentence was good as gospel to Sergi, who said he was discouraged by a business he perceived as battered with thin margins, cutthroat competition and a loss of focus on the customer. What's missing, the two agreed, was hospitality.

“Food is a common language that

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“I LEARNED FROM MY GRANDMOTHER ABOUT HOW POWERFUL FOOD WAS...IN A WAY, THE MEAL IS ABOUT WHO YOU EAT WITH AND THAT’S THE ESSENCE OF HOSPITALITY.” — JOHN SERGI



Centerplate transforms outdoor spaces into hospitality experiences.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48

connects people,” Sergi said. “I learned from my grandmother about how powerful food was. Everyone who loves to cook does it because they want to cook for people. In a way, the meal is about who you eat with and that’s the essence of hospitality.”

Sergi said he kept a dialogue going with Des and eventually decided to walk away from his successful consulting practice for a chance back in the corporate world. He began to his new job as the company’s chief design officer in February 2010.

The result of that collaboration is an initiative called Centerplate Stir, a trademarked concept that plans to “imagine and create custom hospitality solutions as uniquely

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NAME **Merchandising**

No.



**CASE STUDY:
CENTERPLATE
HOSPITALITY
INITIATIVE**

Centerplate operates a number of team stores at its partner facilities, including two for the University of Louisville (Ky.), which plays at the brand new KFC Yum! Center.

“The great thing about that project was the strategic partnership,” said Scott Marshall, Sr. VP, Retail Merchandise and Fan Innovation.

“When the team wanted to market a certain type of concept, we were able to be there with product and transfer it to retail that the consumer could understand,” he said.

That included the team’s whiteout and blackout nights, where fans are encouraged to dress entirely in white, or black — the same color as the men’s team uniform for the night. In recent support of a breast cancer awareness campaign, the team dressed in pink. Centerplate quickly responded and helped the men’s team create specialty shirts for the game and partnered to promote the pink clothing through media campaigns.

“A big part of working with clients is understanding that it’s their brand. They know it best,” said Marshall. For the San Francisco 49ers, that meant working with store officials to pick out their 2011 clothing line through a fashion show at a downtown hotel.

“We not only wanted to show what’s out there, but give them intimate details to explain the direction of the market,” Marshall said. “It’s a tremendous tool to show the different lines coming out, things their fans would love and enjoy.”

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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

compelling as the events and venues and teams they support,” according to the Centerplate’s website. “With the Stir™ group you get all the operational benefits of Centerplate’s size and logistical expertise, with the innovative energy and nimble creativity of a boutique conceptual design firm.”

“I completely believed the idea that you can do hospitality on scale,” he said. “Our task was that we desired to be the only hospitality company in our space. While the other companies were focused on operations and margins and profit/loss statements, we would focus on hospitality and solely turn our focus on the customer. We were putting our fate in the customers’ hands.”

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“WHILE THE OTHER COMPANIES WERE FOCUSED ON OPERATIONS AND MARGINS AND PROFIT/LOSS STATEMENTS, WE WOULD FOCUS ON HOSPITALITY AND SOLELY TURN OUR FOCUS ON THE CUSTOMER.” — JOHN SERGI



Centerplate food concepts are designed with locally sourced, fresh ingredients in mind.

NAME **Strategic Design** No.

In August, Centerplate won the contract to provide food services for the new 49ers Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif. The company has committed to invest \$1 million of its money in capital expenditures on the project.

“We didn’t want to do the same thing as in the old building. When we went through our process, Centerplate got that very quickly,” said Jed York, the team’s president and CEO. “We wanted to take the normal fan fare that most people consume in a game and make sure it’s as good as it can possibly be. When you’re talking about Northern California, there are few places that have as many options for locally sourced ingredients.”

That includes a centralized kitchen to serve the stadium’s cutting-edge suite stack, and menus “designed to have the best price point for each seat,” York said. Clients can entertain on the stadium’s LEED-gold green roof, a first for pro football and with spectacular views from the mountains to the San Francisco Bay.

And then there’s tailgating. Located across the street from an amusement park and convention center, the stadium will have 30,000 parking spots within a 15-minute walk of the stadium.

“Whether it’s the pregame experience in the tailgating area, or the clubs and high-end spaces we’re planning throughout the stadium. No one has put the work in like we have with Centerplate,” York said.



**CASE STUDY:
CENTERPLATE
HOSPITALITY
INITIATIVE**



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Q&A

WITH DES HAGUE
PRESIDENT & CEO, CENTERPLATE

by DAVE BROOKS

In the Driver's Seat

It's been two and a half years since Des Hague was hired to helm Centerplate, transforming the concessionaire from a publicly-traded behemoth to a hospitality centric tour de force. Since the beginning of the year, Centerplate has signed a number of major contracts including the 49ers Stadium in Santa Clara and the University of Notre Dame (Ind.). *Venues Today* caught up with the CEO to hear his thoughts on the philosophy of hospitality and the changing nature of the food business.

What are your thoughts on a food service company versus a hospitality company?

The importance of providing a total solution in any industry is very important. If you're doing remedial work, it's just a commodity and it's easily replicated, easily worked out and always goes to the person willing to charge the lowest amount of money. I've always believed, in any business I've run and owned, that you have to drive profound value to the client. You do that by driving the overall revenue stream. When we purchased Centerplate two-and-a-half-years ago, we bought into the attractiveness of the industry because we didn't see any stand out performers. It was a sea of sameness where people were coming in, competing for a new book of business and either throwing money at it through higher commissions or trying to make money over the length of the contract. We took a different approach. We wanted to create a true differentiating strategy for our clients. How do we integrate food service with the other services we provide like merchandise, online retail, venue management, digital media, marketing services and sponsorship deals? How do we utilize all the things we do to drive a better outcome for the revenue of our clients. If you're not careful, the industry is going to be selling \$20 beers in a number of years. We wanted to look at utilizing all of the things we do to drive more ticket sales. Bringing more people to meetings at the convention center, driving more skiers to the ski resort or more fans to a college game, or buyers to purchase more at an airport that we manage.

Does that involve using consumer data?

If you think about it, every extra ticket that event operator sells is huge for the owner or operator. It's our job to help them drive ticket sales

using proven concepts, whether it's all you-can-eat seats or loaded tickets. The goal is to drive ticket sales and give the fan an ultimately different return.

Do you stay active with the hospitality group?

The hospitality group started with us thinking about all of the services that a client needs. It's not just F&B, that's just one element. I toured the country two-and-a-half to three years ago and I looked at some of the marquee venues including Citi Field (New York), US Open (New York), Wembley Stadium (London), Galatasaray (Turkey), the Miami Masters and Indian Wells (Calif.) and found that there's some great work going off. The one common driver behind them all was a hospitality expert named John Sergi. He was developing these programs and would work with all the different concessionaires of the world to put these programs together. I thought that if we're going to truly differentiate, we need to be involved in upfront design, not just be given the layout and say put your stuff in here. That's why we hired John Sergi, because we didn't want to have a consultant working for us. Planning doesn't start and stop with the completion of a project. You refine it, and you continue to move forward. I spoke to John and decided that we needed him to help drive our strategic planning group, and then have the continuity and make the significant investment to continue to have that type of leader in our organization. It was that important for us that I wouldn't rent it out. Now he's working on 49ers Stadium in Santa Clara (Calif.) and the convention center in New Orleans. We wanted the right person leading our design group, then combined that with our restaurant group which is Michael Koffman and Trey Lucas and others to complement with true restaurant capability skills.

What is he working on now?

We are pleased with the acquisition of the convention center at New Orleans. It's a multi-phase project, we took over in July and we've already launched a new concept. It's very one of a kind, very site specific. We don't want to do cookie cutter. We call it the inside-out approach. We work with local chefs to bring the big venues to life.

How do current facilities compare to older facilities?

If you think about Santa Clara, we haven't gotten anyone's great opinions or oversights or mistakes or great success to overcome or use. We're setting up from scratch. But even if it was an existing facility, the approach really doesn't change in terms of how we seek and clarify the objectives of our clients. That's why we don't do cookie cutter, but the same things are going to be asked and answered. What do you want to be and, if you were food, how would you define yourself? That same level of thinking would be applied to merchandise and the other services we provide. We want the customer experience to speak with one voice. If one guy is looking at sponsorship and one guy is looking at branding and one guy is doing food and another one is local relationships, the experience comes across as a mishmash. At Centerplate, we spend time making sure everyone understands the consequences of those actions. When we work with a client, we sit down with them and help them realize how to achieve their objectives by minimizing clutter and maximizing the guest experience.

How does the business equation work?

The services we provide and the returns we provide do not correlate to spending more

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Q&A

WITH DES HAGUE
PRESIDENT & CEO, CENTERPLATE**IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 54

money up front. We've found the opposite. We've won 26 accounts over the last two and a half years and the upfront investments are significantly less. It's the overall program we're putting in place. We're going to drive the overall returns, we're going to get the margins right. We're in double-digit growth this year and we were almost in double-digit growth last year. I'm not talking about acquisitions or our merger with Boston Culinary Group. When you compare like-to-like venues, there is no one who is delivering anywhere near the growth that we are. It's all around getting right products in place, studying your merchandise playbook, adding value to our clients and getting the insight that creates the strategy. If I'm a season ticket holder spending less than someone who is a value seeker who only goes to a few games a year, we need to look at that. We have to analyze purchasing habits and develop programs that meet their concerns.


Maybe it's menu fatigue — really, it could be a number of things. We think it all comes down to our mantra of results, not rhetoric.

How do your past experiences guide your way of thinking about concessions?

I've had the pleasure of being president of Safeway and IHOP, and really gained an understanding of the power data brings. Even though I am a significant investor and board member and operating partner with Kohlberg, I try not to have my own opinions force customer purchases because I'm not the average consumer. Research and data should drive strategy, and not the other way around. Price does not dictate hospitality. It's attitude. As a father of two, if I'm at the game with my family, hospitality means I get four hot dogs and there's a value meal for me, whether it's a combo meal or a free 32-oz. coke. Maybe it's a kids meal that helps the father. That to me defines hospitality.

How important is it to profile the consumer?

We track and we look and we know the percentages that each category is spending in our channels and then we give it to Scott Marshall in fan engagement and Tammy Haggey, who's handling merchandise and program development for the various categories. We've muscled up on the intel gathering side and it's manifesting in unbelievable sales performance in North America. We have 250 venues and we service 100 million guests or fans per year. We're number one in all the channels in which we operate, with the most collegiate and sports clients, the most convention centers and the number of ski resorts. We've also got the most growth in those categories. The companies that we work for, public or private, don't need another administrator. They need a leader, somebody who is going to drive their business, and that's what we're doing.



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“THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE ARE GOOD FRIENDS AND A STRONG BULLPEN.” — BOB LEMON

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

PACIFIC NORTHWEST COOL

One Stir client that helps define the initiative is the Seattle Mariners and Safeco Field.

Hall of famer Cleveland pitcher and manager Bob Lemon once said, “The two most important things in life are good friends and a strong bullpen.”

The Seattle Mariners bumped up their bullpen in 2005 with the signing of “King” Felix Hernandez, but the area where fans could watch the pitchers warm up and wind up — not so great.

“It has been under-utilized for years,” said Pascal. “It was pretty dark, fairly uninspired. It did okay, with some younger demographics on the weekend when it was sunny, but it was

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The 'Pen' at Safeco Field

NAME Partnerships

No.



CASE STUDY: CENTERPLATE HOSPITALITY INITIATIVE

Washington, D.C., is one of the cities where Centerplate is able to flex its full organizational might. Working with Events DC's President and CEO Gregory O'Dell, the company manages concessions at RFK Stadium along with the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, where in April 2010, the company provided concessions at the World Leaders for Nuclear Security Summit, one of the largest gatherings of heads of state on the planet.

“It's not often that you have a partner like Centerplate that's willing to grow with you and understands the opportunity,” O'Dell said. “With their international focus on events, hospitality, convention centers and sports, it's great to have a partner that understands that and can grow with our different initiatives and different areas of business.”

Centerplate Chief Marketing Officer Bob Pascal said his firm has found ways to enter into direct business partnerships, including a recent Centerplate meeting of convention centers, designed to drive new business and gain feedback from the industry.

“Many service partners live inside the box and won't be active helping you pursue that part of the business,” O'Dell said. “Centerplate has been willing to make the investment — either new equipment or new small wares that are necessary to help us drive business for everyone.”



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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 58

clearly an area of the ballpark that had some untapped potential.”

Located between left field and centerfield, the space had views of both bullpens. Centerplate managers had the idea to use the space as a potential pregame space, with happy hour specials to entice visitors before each game. After all, a bar across the street from the stadium had done a big business hosting pregame parties. Kevin Mather, the team’s VP of Finance & Ballpark operations, decided it was time to get in on some of the action.

“Centerplate came up with a plan to help us open the space earlier before the game,” Mather said. “We thought fans would love to watch batting practice from the stadium instead of watching it from the parking lot.”

“CENTERPLATE CAME UP WITH A PLAN TO HELP US OPEN THE SPACE EARLIER BEFORE THE GAME. WE THOUGHT FANS WOULD LOVE TO WATCH BATTING PRACTICE FROM THE STADIUM INSTEAD OF WATCHING IT FROM THE PARKING LOT.” — KEVIN MATHER

There’s no shortage of things to do in Seattle. Within 50 miles of the Space Needle are four arenas, two football stadiums and a very famous fish market. There are 3.5 million people in the region, many with smart phones, Angry Birds competitions and Pearl Jam rockumentaries on Netflix.

“There has been an explosion of options, compounded by the time pressures we face and the current economic softness” felt from nine percent unemployment and nervousness over the future, Pascal said. “The competition we face today is so threatening because it is so indi-

vidual. Because of the power of technology, the concept of mass entertainment is shifting.”

In the case of the ‘Pen at Safeco Field, the Centerplate team knew they wanted to protect the celebratory nature of the event, and communicate the Mariners’ brand message.

“You start asking yourself all sorts of questions like, ‘Where am I? What’s special about this place? What’s its identity? What is its brand?’” Sergi said. “You even ask yourself insane questions like ‘If the Seattle Mariners were food, what would they be?’ Then you

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NAME Dining

No.

“I was in New Orleans meeting with Bob Johnson, the president and general manager of the New Orleans Morial Convention Center, and he shared with me the idea that you could take something like a convention center kitchen and actually make it relevant to a city with the culinary richness of New Orleans,” said John Sergi, Centerplate chief design officer. “I knew that if I wanted to make their kitchen the real deal, I had to connect with the local supply chain.”

Once Centerplate took over the contract, they were given 18 months to convert the space, but Sergi said he wanted to get started much sooner to capture the energy of the move. He brought on food consultant Donald Lick and shortened the turnaround time from 18 months to five weeks.

“We want to start showing people what this is about right away,” said Sergi. Early items included a black-eyed pea chili dog, a sausage and pepper sandwich, a po’ boy concept with fried fish and catfish and a green market with seasonal salads.

“This was a temporary step. We barely moved a piece of equipment” to develop the menu, Sergi said. “If you’re going to do Cajun fare in New Orleans, either do it right or don’t do it at all.”



**CASE STUDY:
CENTERPLATE
HOSPITALITY
INITIATIVE**



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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 60

come up with a broad identity of where you are, and you ask how you can express that identity via the tools you have in food.”

Sergi said he wanted to come up with a couple things for the 'Pen that appealed to both families and young professionals — new stuff that people haven't seen before in sports facilities.

“I wanted to take a couple foods most people would find in a family-friendly sports environment and talk to people with those items,” he said.

The first chef Sergi brought on was Ethan Stowell, a famed Seattle entrepreneur and lifelong Mariners fan behind successful restaurants like Anchovies and Olives, Tavolata, Staple & Fancy and an eclectic and world famous café known as How To Cook a Wolf.

The pair began work on the staple items

for the 'Pen — instead of specialty items like roasted suckling pig and slow braised lacinato kale (actual dishes at Tavolata), Sergi and Stowell were focused on staple items like hot dogs, pizza and hamburgers, things people wanted and expected at a ballpark.

The pair teamed up with a local rancher to source ground beef from locally raised cows, fed natural grass. They bought the most expensive local lettuce and utilized vine red tomatoes and Tillamook cheddar cheese. They developed a cooking method that brought out the beefy flavor of the burger and created a thin layer of marbled fat. They paired the burger with a plate of frites and dipping sauce — Hamburger and Frites was born.

Next was pizza, a by-the-slice pie sling-ing operation that utilizes a \$70,000 specialty oven. The pizza is topped with locally produced mozzarella, fresh tomatoes and organic

vegetables and pepperoni.

“Pizza sales went through the roof and it was because we personalized the experience. We didn't try to make people buy an entire personal pizza. That's not hospitality,” Sergi said. “You should be able to eat at the beginning of the game then grab a slice in the fifth if you want.”

For the 20-somethings, Sergi created a crepes stand, like one found on the streets of Paris.

“They're literally folded in a triangle, and you carry them around in your hand,” he said. Savory crepes were stuffed with turkey, ham and Beecher's handmade cheddar, while sweet crepes included strawberries or bananas and Nutella.

For Mexican fare, Sergi brought on master chef Roberto Santibanez, creator of Rosa Mexicano in New York (and now on the West



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“YOU START ASKING YOURSELF ALL SORTS OF QUESTIONS LIKE, ‘WHERE AM I? WHAT’S SPECIAL ABOUT THIS PLACE? WHAT’S ITS IDENTITY? WHAT IS ITS BRAND?’ — JOHN SERGI

Coast at L.A. Live). The pair developed a sandwich shop based on an authentic Mexican tortas.

“The bread roll we use looks like a tortoise, so we called the space Tortugas Valladores, which means the ‘flying tortoise,’” he said. “We imagined it flying out of shop while balls are flying into the stands.”

Pascal said the lift in the space was fast and obvious. Within months, per caps were up 80 percent and the entrances were shifted so that nearly 30 percent of the visitors would pass through the space.

“We created our own merchandise stand and called it The Good Stuff,” Mather said. “I’m a bit of an older guy and when I saw that name, I thought to myself ‘who came up with that?’ But now merch sales in that area have climbed 300 percent.”

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Savory Crepe served at The 'Pen, Safeco Field, Seattle



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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 63
CHANGING THE CENTERPLATE CULTURE

Centerplate CEO Des Hague said the company is constantly talking with its customers, researching their buying trends and trying to develop an understanding of each market.

“We’ve launched a minimum of 10,000 surveys in the last year because we don’t want to pretend we know what the customer is saying about our minor league baseball or NFL experiences,” Hague said. “We’ve divided our customers to between seven and 12 subsets. Things like family guy, value seeker, sports fanatic, season ticket holder, social hobnobbler and so on; we’ve developed specific programs for each of those customer sets. When we go to a convention, the social person looks for different things than the value seeker. It could be the difference of an email blast on a Blackberry

“THE BREAD ROLL WE USE LOOKS LIKE A TORTOISE, SO WE CALLED THE SPACE TORTUGAS VALLADORES, WHICH MEANS THE ‘FLYING TORTOISE. WE IMAGINED IT FLYING OUT OF SHOP WHILE BALLS ARE FLYING INTO THE STANDS.” — KEVIN SERGI



Torta Sandwiches from The 'Pen at Safeco Field, Seattle



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that helps identify a merchandise deal.”

Sergi said he wants to continue to push per cap growth with all his clients, but he’s careful not to do it through price increases.

“Our strategy is to change people’s behavior, first and foremost gaining their trust,” he said of his early days creating the Stir division and its focus on hospitality to life. “We knew that we had to start culturally from the inside to change Centerplate from a major player to a hospitality company. We believed we had to give the company a soul. Bring some humanity to it. Hospitality starts at home and we started by creating the inside within us.”

Sergi hungered to bring change to the company, but its sheer size following its 2010 merger with Boston Culinary Group gave Sergi what he hadn’t had before — scale. It was suddenly possible to change the entire industry, Sergi believed.

“The root of the business we’re in is hospitality. Yet something went sideways along the path. We just want to bring it back to a place it should have never left. People come to events to have a good time and food can seal the deal.”

Somehow the system got too transactional, Sergi said. Companies began to look at food tactically, as a source of revenue. Sergi calls it “making food to just sell food.”

When creating a food concept, the first thing Centerplate officials think about is “who is this supposed to appeal to and how do you want them to feel?” explained Pascal. From there, they begin to draft a concept and look at the individualized needs of a particular building.

“What may be right for pro baseball in Tampa may be different in Seattle,” Pascal said. “And what works on the 300 level might not work on the 100 level.”

Sergi said his programs sound complex,

but are often much simpler to implement than existing systems.

“People have this concern when I come on to a project that I’m going to complicate their lives,” he said. “Actually, my programs use fewer ingredients because we don’t rely on sleight of hands. If you want to talk to customers with food, the fewer the ingredients, the clearer the voice,” he said, adding, “and by trying not to do too many things, we improve the chance of doing those things well.”

WINE AT THE BALLPARK

Sergi has never liked the way wine is served at ballparks. For starters, wines are often ordered in advance, especially in suites, where usually an administrative assistant or intern (who probably won’t be attending the game) completes the order.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 66 →



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“WHAT MAY BE RIGHT FOR PRO BASEBALL IN TAMPA MAY BE DIFFERENT IN SEATTLE. AND WHAT WORKS ON THE 300 LEVEL MIGHT NOT WORK ON THE 100 LEVEL.” — BOB PASCAL

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN SERGI CONTINUED FROM PAGE 65

“And the pricing is confusing,” Sergi said. “You’ll see a place that has eight chardonnays within \$7 of each other, although they’re all effectively the same wine. That’s a lot of visual noise for the person looking at the list, and it’s confusing. If you didn’t know a lot about wine, there’s little difference between a \$32 bottle of wine and a \$37 bottle.”

With Tropicana Field, Tampa, Fla., as his working laboratory, Sergi experimented with the Rays’ pairings. The first thing he did was create three price tiers for the major varietals like the pinots, cabernet, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. The three-tiered structure gave drinkers a clear understanding of the top and the bottom, with a clearly defined middle.

“And we changed things up. Rather than six merlots, we added a Malbec and a Riesling and a Chianti. The wine list was smaller — we



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went from 43 to 26 options, yet we still increased varietal representation. And the list is easy to read with the same layout as a restaurant menu.”

THE FUTURE

To really make an entire hospitality concept work, Sergi acknowledges that a vast number of different puzzle pieces go into play, but the most important piece is usually the same — receptive owners. Without top decision makers fully immersed in the idea, it’s nearly impossible to make true structural change.

When Sergi met Jed York, CEO and president of the San Francisco 49ers, he knew he had to be part of the team’s \$500 million stadium project in Santa Clara, Calif. Centerplate had long held the stadium’s contract for Candlestick, its current home and, in July, signed a deal for the new facility.

“We hit it off during that first conversation. I knew he was going to do something special and he was really going to let it run,” Sergi said. “We got the job and this thing is beginning to show signs of really stepping out and doing things no one has seen before.”

For starters, that means working on the things people want and expect — things like hot dogs and hamburgers.

“Instead of punting with fancy stuff, let’s get the things they want right,” he said. “Some of the worst hot dogs on the planet are served in stadium suites. A guy in a \$20 seat in the upper deck can buy a hot dog made to order in the stands, but in a suite that annually costs six figures, they make you buy 14 at a time for \$100 and it comes to you in a chafing dish. I pay more for my ticket so that means I should pay more for food? What’s up with that, man?”

Centerplate has committed \$1 million to helping develop the kitchen and build out hundreds more points of sale at the new stadium. Early plans include concession islands with different food concepts scattered throughout an inner and outer concourse. Suites will be stacked in a tower with a centralized kitchen.

“We’re going to keep reinvesting and look at our concessions every five years to figure out how to upgrade our system and stay on the cut-

ting edge,” York said.

In the meantime, Sergi said he plans to continue his favorite part of the job — combining the world for new food concepts and working with top international chefs.

“I’ve been doing this for 47 years and I

love to eat, but let me tell you where I don’t look for inspiration. I don’t look inside sports facilities,” he said. “I’m looking to bring the outside food world inside our client facilities and create a unique experience that fans will remember.”




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Quality Control Room

Centerplate COO Chris Verros keeps company on course

by DAVE BROOKS

Centerplate's food is only as good as the people who serve it. That's where Chief Operating Officer Chris Verros comes in. Among his many duties, the former Boston Culinary Group executive is charged with getting new hires up to speed and maintaining a quality hospitality experience across all Centerplate clients.

We caught up with Verros to find out what goes into hiring and training a Centerplate employee.

MORALE

"There are a lot of man hours in the service industry. You're working on holidays, you're working on weekends and you're working when everyone else is having a good time," said Verros. "You've really got to create the same atmosphere for the people working those events so they feel like they're getting something out of it besides just a paycheck."

Verros said he tries to develop employees through camaraderie, incentive based bonuses and clear communication regarding company goals.

"And communication — you can find out a lot by talking with the people on the ground. You can't have an executive team that's afraid to jump into any job and get their hands dirty," he said. "I don't mind walking past the condiment stand, and if I see something is out of place, helping to put it back together or taking the garbage out of the trash can and throwing it into the dumpster."

TRAINING

"We have all sorts of training programs, all implemented in different ways," said Verros. That includes sending managers through Centerplate's proprietary Quest training program, developed to build a consistent hospitality presence across all Centerplate client venues.

"There are all sorts of different modules and a lot depends on your facility. If you're in a stadium you're going to participate in our frontline module with a minimum of eight hours of instruction," he said. The company also has company-wide training initiatives that originate from Human Resources, courses led by managers with a long track record in the field as well as webinars and even phone training.

When the company implemented its Quest program a few years back, Verros said he found the program to be helpful, "but very difficult for the management program to implement on a regular basis because there was so much information."

Verros said he came up with a simpler regimen that still maintains a high quality of service.

"It's created an awareness each and every day," he said. "Everyone gets a Quest score and we work with them to improve their scores on a daily basis."

EXPERTISE

Verros said Centerplate's acquisition of Boston Culinary Group in 2010 brought together the best minds from both companies.


"There was a lot of nervousness and apprehension from the guys at BCG who spent

their entire careers working for (former BCG owner) Joe O'Donnell, but this has been a seamless experience. The people from Centerplate opened their arms to welcome the BCG team, and vice versa. If you take a look around, there's a strong mix of senior executives from both organizations."

O'Donnell is now the chairman of Centerplate, while Dave Oberlander, Greg Fender and Sal Ferullo from BSG are now all working as senior VPs within Centerplate. The company promoted Kate Tanner to reach out to the meeting planning community and liaison with the convention center industry. The company has hired Gary Prell, a former Centerplate employee brought back to lead as VP of Culinary Development.

"One of his primary roles will be to work with our culinary leadership network and identify talented chefs and put them on a path that grants them a worldly experience to handle our diversity of clients," he said. "You could be in a restaurant one day and then work at a stadium serving 60,000 people the next day."

That also includes developing strategy for Centerplate's hundreds of culinary concepts across its broad client base.

"We believe in choosing the right space and the right food concept, and doing it as spectacularly and as good as it can possibly be done," he said. "Don't make it a challenge for the customer to pick through a long menu. They should understand what they want to order when they step up to one of our concepts, where quality product is always on the table." 

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