



## Downtime Doldrums?

Posted on [September 1, 2016](#) by [Pizza Today](#)

### Rev up slow periods for maximum productivity



Pizzeria operators live by the phrase “the guest comes first” and train staff to embrace the motto. But what happens during times when staff members outnumber your guests?

For Scott Wallis, regional manager at The Rock Wood Fired Kitchen in Washington, it boils down to prioritizing more critical side work like rolling silverware or folding to-go boxes when the restaurant dies down. Afterwards, if it’s still dead, he directs staff to larger projects that can be tackled.

Deep cleaning tasks are assigned to the front of house, including sweeping and mopping the walk-in keg cooler, where kegs are moved to achieve a thorough clean, as well as washing out the server reach-in -- where items needed quickly such as back-up dressings are kept -- by breaking down shelves and running them through the dishwasher.

The shelves of the host desk are also wiped down, and the high chairs are rounded up for the hosts to clean.

The back-of-house slow-period tasks at The Rock Wood Fired Kitchen are also cleaning-related, and are accomplished after the cooks complete their prep work. For example, cooks clean reach-ins thoroughly and wheel them away from walls to reach any grime that may have accumulated behind the units. Cleaning the walk-in fridge, including wiping down shelving and walls, is also a regular downtime project.

David Peters, founder of The Restaurant Expert, adds that a deep cleaning of the employee bathroom, dusting window ledges and cleaning door areas -- your back door, for instance, where staff often use their feet to open the door when their hands are full easily becomes grubby -- can also be a part of slow-period duties.

Peters says de-gumming the undersides of tables should also be a task undertaken regularly.

“I can guarantee you that I could walk in any restaurant, put my hand under the table and I’m going to find gum,” says Peters.

At Capri Express, a pizzeria focused on catering, pick-up and delivery in Burr Ridge, Illinois, owner Philip Salamone assigns projects like cleaning coolers, dusting ceilings, picture frames and walls, and taking down ceiling tiles to wipe them clean by writing the tasks down on checklists for employees to complete during slow times.

When they aren't busy with orders, delivery drivers should also be kept busy. Capri Express drivers often visit hotels in the local area, supplying the front desk clerk with a slice of pizza, along with gift cards, menus and business cards for them to distribute to guests.

In Howland, Ohio, Howland Pizza Works Owner Alex Siwicki also sends drivers on promotional runs during slow periods. For example, when Siwicki decided to start lunch time delivery service, delivery drivers brought salads, pizzas and flyers to local businesses to promote their new delivery times.

The drivers at Howland Pizza Works are also cross-trained so they can lend a hand in the store.

"When the drivers are not delivering, they are in the store just like the rest of the staff taking orders over the phone, putting shells in the oven and making pizza," explains Siwicki. "We typically treat them as what we call a floater."

Although these extra activities are imperative for a restaurant to function efficiently, tasks that diverge from an employee's "normal" duties can cause staff gripes.

Proactive management keeps the complaints to a minimum.

Siwicki ensures his delivery drivers know they'll be expected to perform other duties in the initial interview, within their job description and during the training process.

Wallis also heads off complaints during the hiring procedure.

"When we're interviewing, we're looking for people that understand the restaurant business as a team atmosphere," says Wallis.

Both Wallis and Salamone agree it also helps when the pizzeria leadership participates alongside employees in completing slow period tasks.



"For the most part, as long as you set a certain set of boundaries, they will follow as long as they know that you're working side-by-side with them," says Salamone.

When slow period duties are complete, knowing when to cut employees is an acquired skill.

"Often our younger managers don't (cut) properly because they look out and see a full restaurant," explains Peters. "And next thing you know, they finish the night, and they're way over budget."

Peters suggests sidestepping this issue by using the half-hour sales report in your POS system to determine whether your restaurant's sales are down-trending.

Peters and Wallis both say the ending times of events like movies or sports events in the surrounding area can also help you gauge whether you can cut your staff. Further, Wallis suggests factoring in sales forecasted, whether the restaurant has any large parties coming in and how experienced your staff members are.

As they are often reliant on the hours, Salamone keeps his cooks for the entire shift, and uses intuition earned through experience to appropriately schedule and cut his other employees. He also keeps employees' needs in mind by asking them whether they'd like to stay or go.

"I try to keep everyone's hours pretty consistent," says Salamone.

## DOS AND DON'TS OF SLOW PERIODS

- Do maintain consistency among managers. David Peters, founder of The Restaurant Expert, says employees love rules, but they hate inconsistency in the enforcement of those rules. "Make sure that your managers understand exactly what (you're) asking of each of these employees in their jobs so that you're consistent in your management," advises Peters.
- "Don't ask (your employees) to go clean something where they can't keep an eye on their station and take care of the guests," says Scott Wallis, regional manager at The Rock Wood Fired Kitchen in Washington.
- Don't randomly assign slow period tasks. Divide everything that needs to be done into weekly and monthly tasks. "This way nobody feels single

out or made to do extra," explains Peters.

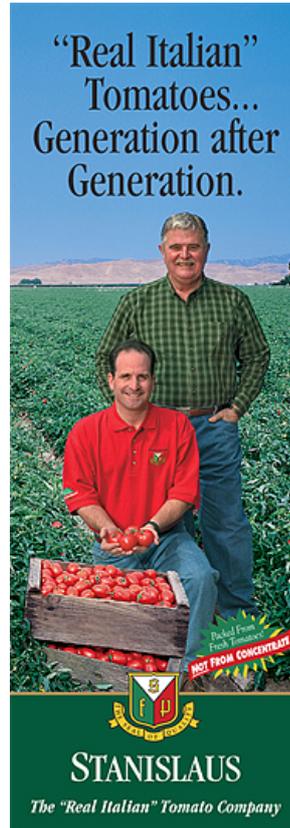
- Do remind staff to remain guest conscious while performing slow period tasks. "If you come in when it's busy or when it's slow, we want (the guest) to have a great experience no matter what," says Wallis.

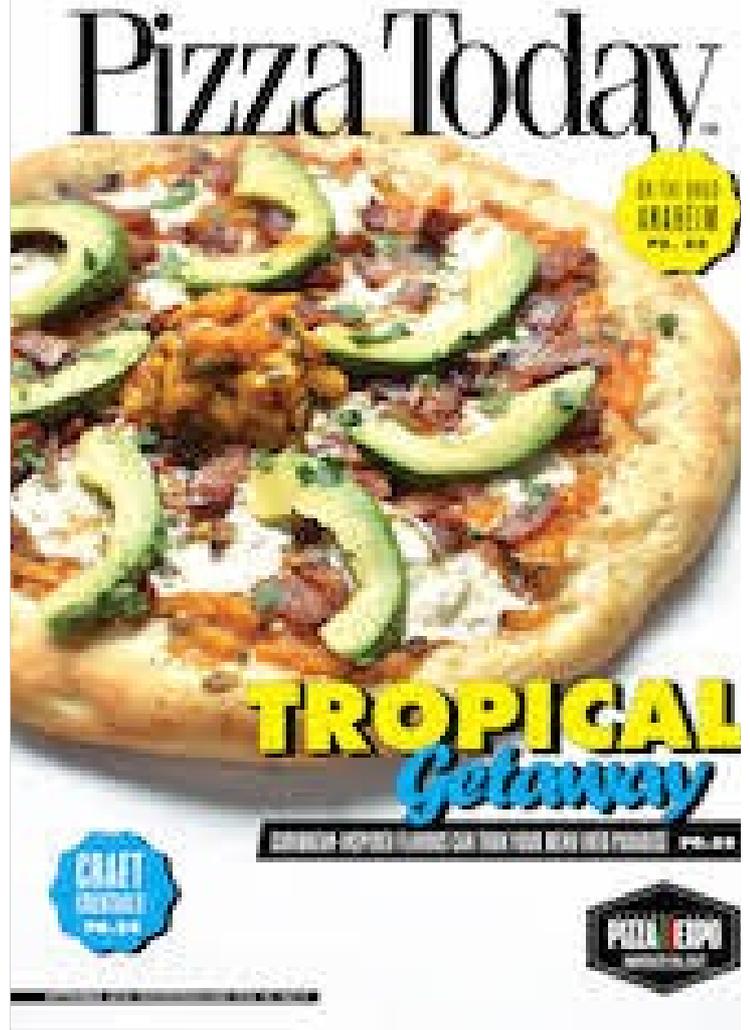
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