Seating Charts that Work: 6 Common Dining Room Floor Plan Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

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Abstract
Having the wrong dining room layout can lead to poor service, unhappy guests, unproductive employees, and missed opportunities to maximize revenue. The author not only remembers the floor plans of restaurants she has visited, but also studies the design and functionality of their dining rooms.

Keywords
restaurant, dining room, floor plan, interior design, functionality

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How many restaurants have you visited? Hundreds? Maybe even thousands? You probably remember the food, the service and maybe something about the ambience of each place, but rare is the person who remembers the floor plan. And why should you?

You should because you can learn a lot from other operators' mistakes. Having the wrong dining room layout can lead to poor service, unhappy guests, unproductive or disgruntled employees, and missed opportunities to maximize your revenue. I'm one of those rare people who not only remember the floor plan of restaurants I've visited, but actually studies how restaurants lay out their dining rooms.

Here's what I've learned about what not to do when it comes time to planning your place.
Dining Room Mistake No. 1
Having the Wrong Table Mix

The most common error I see is restaurants that don’t do a good job matching table size to party size. It’s tempting to fill your restaurant with four-tops because they may seem like a more efficient use of space, and allow you to seat parties of one, two, three or four at any table. But that’s not good planning. In many restaurants, you’ll have more parties of two than any other size, and if you seat that party at a table for four, you’ve lost the opportunity to fill those other two seats as long as that party has the table. In other words, you’ll get only 50 percent seat use off that table. If your restaurant is quiet, there’s no harm and no foul, but if you have other guests waiting for tables, losing those two seats may as well be turning away the revenue that two more covers would bring.

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Spend a few minutes one day analyzing your reservations or POS (point-of-sale) reports to get a sense of the mix of parties you typically attract. What proportion of your guests dine in a party of two? And do you have roughly the same proportion of deuces? Many restaurant owners like to have more deuces than necessary because they can always be combined to accommodate larger parties, which can be a good strategy depending on how busy your restaurant is.

Dining Room Mistake No. 2
Putting Your Two-Tops in the Wrong Place

It is one thing to have the right number of two-tops, but quite another to position them correctly. In almost every case, guests strongly prefer to sit with at least one side of their tables “anchored” by walls or other impermeable structures, especially when they are in a party of two. So put your deuces along walls or partitions, next to windows, up against columns, or otherwise adjacent to some kind of design element that helps your guests define their personal space. And do your best to put those tables parallel to their anchors so that both guests have the psychological benefit of the anchor. Some of the worst restaurant layouts have a row of deuces down the center of the dining room, flanked by traffic aisles. Guests hate these tables and will either ask outright to be reseated or, if that’s not possible, will hold their table allotment against you. And if you must put tables along high-traffic aisles, do your best to put them parallel to the direction of traffic.

Another common error is to pack two-tops as closely together as possible to maximize floor space, especially along banquettes. A recent national survey asked consumers how they felt about tables for two spaced this way, and the nearly unanimous response was that spacing tables as close as 12 inches or less was very unsettling and could even spur guests to choose another restaurant. (I am working on research that I hope will provide more guidance about the optimal spacing for dining tables, but for now ensure that you provide at the very least a foot of space between parallel tables.)

Dining Room Mistake No. 3
Ignoring Breezes and Blasts

One of the challenges of building a restaurant is coordinating all of the components of the design so that they work in harmony. Usually the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems are planned well before the seating is arranged; an approach that often results in one or more tables positioned directly below an air diffuser or very close to doorways in frequent use. A cold, wind-blown guest is a miserable guest. If you are starting from scratch with your restaurant’s buildout, work with your mechanical engineer to make sure that supply air is not being dumped directly over guest tables or waiting areas. Also, engineers will often want to use higher air pressure in the dining room to help with ventilating the kitchen but the system needs to be balanced well so that there is no discernable rush of conditioned air past or over guest tables every time the kitchen door opens. Doors to the outside need to be considered, too. Tables placed near the doors should be protected from strong variations in air temperature either seasonally or year-round. Where I live, many restaurants erect heavy curtains a few feet in front of the main entrance door to create a temporary “air lock” in the winter months.

Unpleasant blasts aren’t always related to hot or cold air. Make sure that the location of speakers is consistent with a pleasant but not overwhelming ambience for every table, and that sounds from the kitchen — good or bad — are not
Wisdom:

Tips to Help You Avoid Floor Plan Mistakes

✓ Get a better feel for your mix. Analyze your reservations or POS (point-of-sale) reports to get a sense of the mix of parties you typically attract. This will help you configure your tables for maximum use.

✓ Anchor your tables. In almost every case, guests strongly prefer to sit with at least one side of their tables “anchored” by walls or other impermeable structures, especially when they are in a party of two.

✓ Give guests some space. In a national survey, when asked how they felt about tables for two packed as closely together as possible to maximize floor space, especially along banquets, customers nearly unanimously responded that spacing tables as close as 12 inches or less was very unsettling and could even spur them to choose another restaurant.

✓ Don’t blow them away. If you are starting from scratch with your restaurant’s buildout, work with your mechanical engineer to make sure that supply air is not being dumped directly over guest tables or waiting areas.

✓ Maintain visibility. People feel more comfortable when they have some idea of what is happening in the space around them, so don’t make booth backs too high to be seen over from a sitting position. (A good maximum height for most booth backs is about 52 inches.) Depending on your clientele, seeing other guests might also be an important aspect of the dining experience. It’s also a good strategy to allow guests to see at least a bit of the dining room from the host area so that they can gauge whether your restaurant is the right fit for them at the moment. Information like how many other diners are present, who they are, and maybe even what they’re wearing are all important to customers when they arrive at a restaurant for the first time. Unless your concept depends strongly on a sense of mystery (and few really do), give your customers a few clues about the experience to come so that they will feel more comfortable and confident about dining with you.

Guests don’t want to see things like wait stations, restroom doors, storage areas, dish rooms or the fluorescent glow of the back of the house. Most people can easily see anything that falls within a 120-degree cone of vision. In other words, an arc from about 10 o’clock to 2 o’clock in front of them. So even if a seat isn’t facing directly at the kitchen door, guests seated there might still be bothered by the changing light and movement if the door falls within this visual arc. Good designers will use partitions of some kind to block direct lines of sight toward unattractive areas.

✓ Reduce the schlep. A rule of thumb is to have no table more than 60 feet from the food pickup area. There are a few concepts that can get away with greater distances, but, in general, having your servers travel farther than this is an invitation to slow service, cold food and poor online reviews.

Dining Room Mistake No. 4
Forcing Guests to See What They Don’t Want to See

Guests want to see four things when they dine at your restaurant: What’s on the table in front of them, the people they are dining with, the view (if you have one), and at least some of the rest of the dining room. People feel more comfortable when they have some idea of what is happening in the space around them, so don’t make booth backs too high to be seen over from a sitting position. (A good maximum height for most booth backs is about 52 inches.) Depending on your clientele, seeing other guests might also be an important aspect of the dining experience. It’s also a good strategy to allow guests to see at least a bit of the dining room from the host area so that they can gauge whether your restaurant is the right fit for them at the moment. Information like how many other diners are present, who they are, and maybe even what they’re wearing are all important to customers when they arrive at a restaurant for the first time. Unless your concept depends strongly on a sense of mystery (and few really do), give your customers a few clues about the experience to come so that they will feel more comfortable and confident about dining with you.

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Dining Room Mistake No. 5
Keeping Staff From Seeing What They Need to See

Great servers may seem to have eyes in the back of their heads but it’s really a good dining room layout that helps them see what needs to be done for their tables. Bad design includes booth walls or partitions that are too high for servers to see over, oddly shaped rooms that make it hard for staff to determine how their tables are doing, and multiple level changes that make it harder for servers to get to their tables easily.

Perhaps even more important is the line of sight from the host station to the dining areas. In busy restaurants, your host needs to know which tables are available now, which ones are empty but need resetting, and how long it will be before a specific spot is likely to open up. There are software solutions to managing tables but these can be pricey, especially for a start-up restaurant. The host or hostess is perhaps the most important player in ensuring that you use
your tables effectively, so make this person’s job easier by giving them a good view of the dining room from their host stand. It’s OK if they have to turn around to see the status of most dining areas, but you don’t want to force them to leave their posts just to get a status report. Of course, if your restaurant is really busy, you can staff the host station with two employees: one seating guests and getting a picture of how the dining room is running, and the other greeting guests, taking names and assigning tables. This approach is great if you have the volume and the revenue to afford it.

**Dining Room Mistake No. 6**
**Hobbling Your Staff With Bad Service Area Design**

In many restaurants, service areas aren’t so much designed as plopped into the dining room almost as an afterthought. Staff will have a harder time supporting their tables if they have a long walk to get an extra fork or to refill a water pitcher, so put service areas no farther than 25 feet from any table. (A related rule of thumb is to have no table more than 60 feet from the food pickup area. There are a few concepts that can get away with greater distances, but, in general, having your servers travel farther than this is an invitation to slow service, cold food and poor online reviews.) For most full-service operations, you’ll need one service area for every four to six table stations depending on the complexity of your concept.

What should you include in the service area and how big should it be? That depends on your concept and your intended service style. Early in the concept development phase, think through how you want your service to operate. Will you use a front waiter/back waiter system or service teams? Will servers bus to a service station or to the back of the house? Will sodas come off the bar or from soda guns at service stations? Will you need water and ice at your service stations? Once you have considered how you want service to flow through the entire meal, make a list of everything your front-of-the-house staff will need to touch to provide that level of service. Decide where those items will be stored during service, and what happens to them when they are either not in use or need to be changed. Based on this, you can design an effective service area that helps your employees rather than hinders them.

**It’s Not Magic, Just Common Sense and Planning**

There is no magic to good dining room design. Having common sense and a comprehensive understanding of what kind of experience you want to provide before you begin designing the space can prevent most layout errors. Mistakes get made when the operator doesn’t have a clear picture of what is needed or desired in the front of the house or doesn’t do a good job of communicating needs to the professional design team. Resist the temptation to focus on making the design look good rather than work well. A sharp-looking restaurant may bring guests in the first time, but if your design decisions make it hard to provide them with a positive experience, those guests won’t be coming back. And if your servers can’t do their jobs well or you can’t maximize your revenue potential because you haven’t got the right tables in the right places, you won’t be as successful as you should be.