

# Choosing Your Caterer

**Finding a catering contractor who can deliver the required style and standard of service – at the right price – carries with it the potential for everything to go horribly wrong, says Andrew Etherington.**

**W**HETHER YOU ARE AN experienced FM or new to all this, there are a whole host of matters to consider before you can even start to the actual tendering process. Perhaps the most important consideration is to give yourself sufficient time. A properly researched, planned and executed catering tender exercise will take a minimum of six months to complete. For large and more complex operations it will often take a year from inception to the commencement of the new service contract.

The research stage will enable you to develop a clear strategy setting out exactly what it is you are trying to achieve. Issues for consideration should include the actual type of services required. For instance, are you looking for a traditional staff restaurant offering a wide selection of hot and cold dishes, or would a more simple coffee bar with a grab-n-go offer suffice? What about directors dining, corporate hospitality and meeting rooms? Similarly, you will need to factor in the space available for your catering facilities. Do you have enough kitchen to produce all you require on site and can you provide sufficient dining area? The geographical location of your building is also important. Within a city centre your employees will have plenty of choice nearby, whereas in an out of town situation there will be few alternatives available. All of these variables will all have an impact on the size and complexity of catering facilities and the services offered.

At the same time consideration must also be given to the often vexed question of finances. Increasingly, caterers are being asked to provide their services at no cost to the client. As with all businesses, however, a caterer's success depends upon both the quality and price of the products and services being sold, and the ability and willingness of customers to buy them. Whilst the holy grail of nil-subsidy is often sought, the practicality of reduced employee headcounts, wage freezes and lower spending power often means that the potential volumes of trade are just not there to be had. Organisations must therefore take a pragmatic view on both the level of the financial support they can provide and the extent of catering services they wish to offer their workforce.

Once you have established a clear set of parameters, the next step is the establishment of a Service Specification. This document forms the basis on which the contract will be let, and against which any tenders will be evaluated. It may fall into either of two main categories – being either input or output based. The former is highly prescriptive, detailing all aspects of the service

requirement and offering the caterer little room for deviation. Output specifications tell the caterer what services are required, and give them free rein to the method of achieving this. The ideal specification takes the best from both ends of the spectrum, combining some elements of prescription and client expectations, yet giving the caterer room to demonstrate flair and proactivity.

With all the research and planning completed, and strategies in place, you are now ready to establish the list of potential catering contractors for your tender. If you have the time, this can be achieved through a process of pre-qualification which will weed out those companies that do not meet your criteria. A tender list of any more than six companies will be both impractical and wasteful of much time and effort by all parties involved.

When evaluating tenders, you would be well advised to use an extensive checklist. Space does not permit publication here but key points could include for example: -

- ✓ Is your business important to them – or would you be 'just a number'?
- ✓ Financial stability – ideally your business should represent no more than 20 percent of their turnover.
- ✓ Area management support – anything above 15 contracts per Area Manager means you will not get the level of hands-on support you need.

If this entire process seems too time consuming or you lack the confidence in your own skills, you might consider seeking the assistance of a catering consultant to bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the whole process.

It is vital for the future operation of the catering service that the needs of the client organisation have been properly identified. Independent consultants can assist in this process, advising on good practice, giving warnings where aspirations are likely to have adverse cost implications and generally assisting in the development of fully-costed option appraisals if necessary.

Finally, and to reiterate the opening assertion that you must give sufficient time to this entire process, it is considered vital that once appointed, the incoming caterer is given a sufficient period of time to mobilise the contract. According to the size and complexity of the provision, a 10-12 week lead-time will ensure that everything is properly in place to ensure that the new caterer achieves a successful start and maintains the required standards of quality and service.

- **Andrew Etherington is an independent consultant and a member of FCSI**



**What is FCSI?**  
**Foodservice Consultants Society International - FCSI (UK & Ireland) – represents more than 80 leading independent catering consultants. Management consultants help FM professionals understand catering, to get the best out of contracted or in-house services.**

**Design consultants help with equipment issues and foodservice design. Our members are experienced, independent and highly qualified. Find out more at: [www.fcsi.org.uk](http://www.fcsi.org.uk)**

**PFM is working with FCSI on a series of seminars for FMs about catering in the workplace – see opposite**