

Impact of 9/11 on Flight Catering

A survey conducted recently by the University of Surrey Travel Catering Research Centre (TCRC) showed that there has been a 25% downturn in global production of airline meals. Over 50 production kitchens in 30 countries reported on the impact the events of 11 September were having on their business. Production units that were expecting to produce on average 61,500 meals a week between October and December of this year are only producing 48,000.

Professor Peter Jones, the IFCA Professor of Airline Catering and Director of TCRC, commented "It's inevitable that the downturn in the airline industry will have an impact on caterers and suppliers too. This decline in sales coincides with an increase in costs brought about by the need for greater security, thereby squeezing operating margins even more".

90% of operators are predicting a substantial fall in annual sales. Nearly one third will be down by more than 25%, and only 10% were predicting a marginal decline. There is small difference in the percentage downturn between regions of the world. Hardest hit has been production units in Asia, which are heavily reliant on full service, long haul flights to North America. Europe has been affected slightly less than North America, especially the charter business.

The reduction in volume has resulted in two-thirds of firms laying off employees. In some cases, more than 25% of staff have been laid off. In the UK this could affect several hundred employees. Worldwide many thousands are being laid off.

A range of measures have been taken by caterers. 70% have restricted access to their flight production unit. Two-thirds have increased security during the flight production process and make additional checks on employees. There is also additional security associated with the delivery of trolleys or carts to aircraft in high-loaders. Other measures include adapting tray set layups - largely by replacing metal equipment with plastic, the installation of closed circuit television, the use of x-ray scanning of tray sets, and additional security fencing. The survey showed that 78% of operators expect most of these additional security measures to be permanent.

Prof. Jones concludes "I believe that this downturn will be only short term as passenger demand will return to pre-September levels, by early 2002. However, to support this, airlines will have rationalised not only their routes but also their service offer. Passengers will have more limited choice of flights and routes and be receiving a much simpler meal product at a lower cost. The security measures put in place as an immediate reaction will only gradually be reduced. Those that relate to cabin security, such as the use of plastic cutlery, may disappear altogether once the aircraft cockpit is made totally secure from terrorist threat. Measures relating to the security of catering premises are likely to remain in place permanently".