

The Keys to Professional Foodservice Project Management: What Questions to Ask a Serving Line Supplier

Written by Michael Egan, EVP at Multiteria™

When it comes to working with a supplier on complex projects, asking the right questions can be the difference between seamless execution and frustrating delays. Whether you're a K-12 foodservice director or simply managing a large-scale operation, it's essential to evaluate how well a supplier handles project management processes.

Over the years, I've observed a recurring theme—strong communication, attention to detail, and clear processes often separate a good supplier from a great one. Below, I'll walk you through key areas of supplier project management and highlight the essential questions to ask. These insights will help guide your decision-making and set your next project up for success.

What Makes for Successful Project Management?

Professional project management involves overseeing and executing tasks efficiently while collaborating with multiple stakeholders (reps, dealers, consultants, operators) to reach a common goal. Successful project management in the foodservice industry, for example, involves multiple moving parts—finalizing designs, aligning on timelines, ensuring correct documentation, assuring budget constraints, and handling unexpected challenges.

If your supplier has a structured approach to these areas, it can significantly mitigate risks and enhance your project's outcome.

1. Defining the Project

The foundation of any well-executed project is clear definitions. This includes setting clear goals, specifications, and requirements from the get-go. A good supplier should work with you to refine initial drafts, address ambiguities, and make necessary adjustments as needed – no matter how complex the project may be.

Key Question to Ask Your Supplier:

- How do you ensure all stakeholders are aligned on project goals and specifications?

2. Proofing the Project

Proper project proofing ensures all components of the plan are realistic and feasible. This step often involves reviewing designs for compatibility, identifying spatial constraints, and ensuring systems like wiring or plumbing are accounted for. A detail-oriented supplier can help catch and resolve these issues before they cause delays later in the process.

Key Question to Ask Your Supplier:

- What checks and reviews are in place to ensure designs are compatible and error-free?

3. Managing Documentation

Solid documentation is key to staying organized throughout the lifecycle of a project. Suppliers should maintain detailed records, covering areas like sales drawings, photographs, electrical specifications, and meeting notes, so that nothing crucial is overlooked.

Key Question to Ask Your Supplier:

- How do you document and track project details throughout the process? Are they stored in a CRM system?

4. Quoting the Project

Cost overruns can derail even the most promising projects, which makes precise quotes essential. Suppliers need a process that reviews factors such as sales drawings, lead times, freight quotes, and the scope of work to provide accurate, transparent estimates.

Key Questions to Ask Your Supplier:

- How do you manage pricing quotes to ensure accuracy in your estimates?
- How do you guarantee pricing remains assured throughout the project time frame?
- What is the process and timeline for providing quotes and drawings?

5. Handling Purchase Orders (POs)

Once purchase orders come in, they must align with the exact project specifications that have been agreed upon. This process ensures that materials—like laminates, countertops, or powder coat colors—are accurate, preventing miscommunication that could undermine the project. Remember, the details make all the difference at this step.

Key Question to Ask Your Supplier:

- How do you ensure purchase orders are accurate and aligned with the project design?

6. Submitting to the Factory

Submitting finalized details for production is a pivotal phase. Suppliers must manage this handoff with precision. Tasks such as setting factory deadlines, coordinating procurement, and scheduling production should be handled with care to prevent unexpected delays.

Key Questions to Ask Your Supplier:

- What systems are in place to ensure your factory production aligns with project schedules?
- What has been your delivery performance over the past three years, measured from the promise date?

7. Providing Post-Delivery Support

Even with meticulous planning, some challenges arise post-delivery—whether it’s a punch list item, installation issues or final adjustments. A reliable supplier should be ready to offer quick, efficient solutions that ensure your project achieves its intended outcome.

Key Questions to Ask Your Supplier:

- What post-delivery support do you offer to address issues after installation?
- What is your track record with punch list items, and how long does it typically take to resolve each issue?

Why These Questions Matter

Engaging a supplier is more than just finding a vendor—it’s about establishing a partnership built on trust and reliability. Asking these key questions enables you to understand their practices, better manage your expectations, and set a standard for communication.

Professional project management isn’t only about timelines and budgets; it’s about the finer details that make complicated projects feel effortless. Successful suppliers focus on solving problems, enhancing communication, and adapting to the unique needs of each project.

Your Next Steps

Whether you’re overseeing a new K-12 cafeteria installation or upgrading equipment for an existing operation, evaluating a supplier’s project management capabilities is essential. By asking the right questions and fostering a collaborative approach, you’ll not only ensure success but also establish a relationship that benefits future operations.

If you’d like more insights or assistance in planning your next project, don’t hesitate to get in touch with a professional familiar with industry-specific operations. A strong foundation starts with the right partner.

Michael Egan

EVP, Multiteria

4900 West Electric Avenue
Milwaukee, WI

Phone: (630) 585-1369

Fax: (414) 902-6446

Email: info@multiteriausa.com

About Me:

For the past 17 years, I’ve had the privilege of managing the Multiteria brand, a subsidiary of Lakeside® Manufacturing. During this time, I have contributed to its growth as a leading manufacturer of retail serving line counters, specializing in the K-12, College & University, Healthcare, and B&I segments.

Before I joined Multiteria in 2008, I had a successful 22-year career with a leading foodservice design-consulting firm in White Plains, NY. During that time, I provided design-consulting services to many

leading hotel chains, world-class destination resorts, and restaurant companies. I also had the opportunity to consult with numerous public and private K-12 school districts across the country.

With over 45 years of experience in food service, I've developed a unique understanding of foodservice operations, equipment application, space planning, and the ability to provide creative solutions for architecturally challenging spaces.