# The Roadmap to Success in Serving Line Renovation

**Insights from Tracie Samp, Regional Sales Manager, Multiteria® USA, LLC**

As a former K-12 foodservice director, I understand firsthand that serving line renovations go far beyond updating countertops and equipment. These projects are comprehensive, influencing daily operations, meal service efficiency, student satisfaction, and overall program success. They often feel like solving a high-stakes puzzle.

Over the years, I've come to understand that successful projects start with a solid vision and a detailed roadmap. This white paper is designed to be your go-to guide, helping you manage every stage of the serving line renovation process with confidence. By providing a clear, step-by-step approach, this guide empowers you to balance stakeholder priorities, oversee complex logistics, and avoid the common pitfalls that disrupt timelines and budgets.

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# The Renovation Process

# Step 1: Start with an Idea

Every renovation begins with an idea. Maybe it's driven by prolonged inefficiencies, dated equipment, or new menu considerations. Whatever the spark, the first step is to transform that idea into a viable plan.

**Start by Connecting with Brokers:**

Brokers (also known as manufacturer sales representatives), are invaluable industry intermediaries who can provide critical insights and guidance as you begin your renovation journey. They can offer preliminary estimates on costs, equipment options, utilities, and any necessary upgrades. For example, they'll help you assess whether your current electrical infrastructure can support energy-intensive equipment or if structural changes might be required.

Brokers can also provide a cursory budget estimate, giving you a solid starting point—especially if you're new to purchasing foodservice equipment. It's important to familiarize yourself with the costs of individual pieces of equipment, as many Foodservice Directors are often surprised by how expensive certain items can be. By working with brokers early on, you'll gain a clearer understanding of what's feasible within your budget and avoid unexpected surprises down the line.

**Present and Collaborate with Fellow Leaders in Your Program**

Armed with preliminary estimates, present the renovation concept to the decision-makers within your program. Focus on highlighting the operational pain points the project will address and propose clear, actionable solutions supported by your research. A comprehensive plan—including detailed budgets, timelines, and projected outcomes—is essential to secure approval and build confidence in the initiative.

In this phase, emphasize the tangible value the project will deliver, whether through improved operational efficiency, enhanced service capacity, or a better overall experience for students and stakeholders. As decision-makers, foodservice directors play a pivotal role in this process. While

directors are responsible for identifying equipment needs and determining budget requirements, they must navigate an approval process involving the school board and higher-level executives.

It's important to note that the approval process is less about the CFO's direct input and more about aligning the proposed budget and equipment needs with the foodservice department's priorities. Foodservice directors typically receive a general budget allocation annually, which they use to outline specific equipment requests and associated costs. By presenting a well-researched and compelling case, you can ensure your project aligns with these priorities and secures the necessary approvals.

**Key Stakeholders to Know in the Serving Line Renovation Process**

Renovating a serving line involves a team of professionals, each playing a critical role in ensuring the project's success.

Here's a breakdown of the key players you will likely encounter and how they contribute to the process:

**Architects:**

Architects are essential for major renovations and new builds. They are responsible for designing the overall space, including the footprint, layout, and flow of the project. Their expertise ensures that the serving line integrates seamlessly into the broader design of the facility, balancing functionality with aesthetics. Architects typically become involved early in the process, working closely with foodservice directors and consultants to align the design with operational needs.

**Consultants:**

Consultants act as the bridge between the architect, the end user (you), and the equipment specifications. They specialize in foodservice operations and are responsible for selecting and specifying the equipment that will be used in the space. Consultants ensure that the equipment aligns with the operational goals, budget, and design constraints. They often collaborate with architects to ensure the layout supports efficient workflows and meets industry standards.

**Brokers/Reps:**

Brokers, also known as manufacturer representatives, are local experts who represent multiple lines of foodservice equipment. They have a direct connection to manufacturers and are well-versed in the products they represent. Brokers play a crucial role in helping foodservice directors assess their equipment needs, recommending solutions that fit their specific operations. Establishing a strong relationship with brokers is key—they can provide valuable insights, product demonstrations, and support throughout the decision-making process.

**Dealers:**

Dealers are the ones who sell the equipment. Most equipment purchases go through dealers, making them a critical part of the procurement process. They provide pricing, manage orders, and often coordinate delivery and installation. Dealers work closely with brokers and manufacturers to ensure you get the right equipment at the right price.

**Manufacturers:**

Manufacturers are the companies that fabricate and build the equipment. They sell their products to dealers and rely on brokers/reps to promote and sell their lines. While foodservice directors may not work directly with manufacturers, their role is vital in ensuring the quality and availability of the equipment you choose.

It's important to establish relationships with brokers/reps so that they can help assess equipment needs and recommend the equipment that would work for their foodservice operation.

**Why These Relationships Matter**

Building strong relationships with these stakeholders is essential for a successful renovation. These stakeholders bring expertise, resources, and guidance to the table, helping you navigate the complexities of equipment selection, pricing, and installation. By understanding their roles and collaborating effectively, you can ensure your serving line renovation meets your operational goals and delivers long-term value.

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## Step 2: Secure Funding and Procurement Options

Once your idea is greenlit, the next step is shaping procurement strategies. Here are two key approaches to consider based on my experience:

**Open Bidding: Ensuring Quality and Value:**

Develop a comprehensive bid package and solicit proposals from multiple manufacturers and dealers to ensure a competitive and transparent process. Depending on state regulations, you may need to gather multiple offers from different dealers or even the same dealer to solidify the bid. Including a variety of manufacturers and dealers in the process allows for a broader evaluation of options and ensures you're considering the best solutions available.

When reviewing submissions, focus on key factors such as costs, equipment warranties, installation timelines, and vendor reputation. It's essential to evaluate multiple serving lines, comparing their quality and features to ensure an "apples-to-apples" comparison. This step is critical to avoid settling for a bid that may be low-cost but fails to meet quality standards or project requirements.

If you're unsure how to evaluate bids effectively, there are experts—such as representatives or dealers—who can guide you through the process. These professionals can help you assess the quality of equipment, compare options, and ensure the selected bid aligns with your goals and expectations. Leveraging their expertise can prevent costly mistakes and ensure the final decision delivers the value and performance you need.

**Leverage Federal or State Contracts:**

Alternatively, you can explore federal or state contracts and buying groups, which often streamline the purchasing process and offer pre-negotiated pricing benefits.

During this stage, you'll need to balance the complexities of procurement with management of your broker network. Also, staying organized and keeping lines of communication open with manufacturers is vital to avoiding missteps or delays.

## Step 3: Preliminary Walkthrough and Checklist Creation

Before finalizing designs or placing orders, conduct a thorough walkthrough with key stakeholders, including brokers and electricians. This is where the vision starts to merge with practical logistics.

**Verify Utilities and Equipment Needs:**

Inspect existing infrastructure to ensure compatibility with new equipment. A checklist is invaluable here. Document everything from the capacity of electrical breakers to the condition of water supply lines. Even the most experienced foodservice directors, designers, and equipment dealers can sometimes overlook critical details related to equipment delivery and installation. Despite thorough planning, it's vital to confirm whether the building can accommodate the logistics of moving and installing large equipment like serving counters.

For instance, does the building have a loading dock large enough for a delivery truck to unload items? If not, is a lift gate required? (Keep in mind that not all delivery trucks are equipped with lift gates unless specified in advance.) Additionally, check whether elevator cabs, doorways, and corridors are spacious enough to fit the equipment. This is especially important in buildings constructed before 1970, as they often follow outdated building codes and standards.

**Solutions to Overcome Logistical Challenges:**

- **Evaluate Access Points Early:** Measure and confirm the dimensions of loading docks, door widths, hallways, and elevators to ensure they can accommodate the equipment. Check whether the mullion on double doors is removable or fixed.
- **Plan Around Ceiling Heights:** Identify potential conflicts with ceiling elements such as lighting fixtures, sprinkler heads, soffits, or decorative overhangs, especially when preparing for tall equipment.
- **Think Ahead:** Collaborate with your design team during the planning phase to identify potential obstacles. If necessary, consider customizable equipment that can be manufactured in smaller, more manageable sizes.

Proactive planning is the key to a smooth installation process. By addressing these logistical challenges early, you can avoid costly delays and ensure your project stays on track.

**Address Legacy Challenges:**

Many K-12 foodservice operations face challenges with aging infrastructure that complicates renovations. Common issues include utility stub-ups and fixed elements like metal studs or cinderblock low walls. Utility stub-ups are exposed sections of utility lines—such as electrical, plumbing, or data conduits—that extend from the floor to connect with equipment. These connections are typically recessed into the floor permanently, limiting the flexibility to relocate or reconfigure equipment.

Metal studs or cinderblock low walls are often used in front of serving counters to route plumbing and electrical services. While this traditional approach doubles as a decorative surface, it creates a rigid infrastructure that restricts future redesigns and equipment relocation.

Again, I can’t stress enough how proactively repairing or upgrading systems can save significant time and costs in the long run. Instead, consider working with a counter manufacturer that incorporates built-in utility chase ways and integrates decorative front panels into a single, flexible assembly.

Your punch list should act as a living document that evolves with the project and keeps critical tasks on track.

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## Step 4: Lead Times, Distribution, and Timeline Management

Timelines in renovations are notoriously unpredictable, which makes active project management essential.

**Maintain Close and Open Communication with Your Manufacturer:**

Work with a reliable manufacturer who provides transparent updates on production and delivery schedules. Understanding lead times is crucial, especially when ordering multiple pieces of equipment.

**Long-Term Planning:**

To ensure smooth operations and minimize disruptions during renovations, it's essential to adopt a strategic, long-term approach to planning. Here are some key considerations:

**1. Develop a Five-Year Roadmap**
Maintain a comprehensive five-year roadmap of projects. This allows you to stagger renovations over time, ensuring your team isn't overwhelmed and that operations continue seamlessly. A well-structured roadmap also helps you prioritize projects based on urgency, budget, and resource availability.

**2. Build in Buffer Time**
Unexpected delays are inevitable in any renovation project. To mitigate risks, include buffer time at every stage of the process. This could account for potential shipping delays, last-minute design changes, or unforeseen challenges during installation. A generous buffer ensures you stay on track even when surprises arise.

**3. Seasonal Scheduling for Flexibility**
Consider the timing of your installations carefully. Choose alternative delivery windows during periods of reduced activity, such as summer or spring breaks. These off-peak times provide greater flexibility for meeting deadlines and reduce the impact on daily operations. For example, schools and universities might schedule renovations during academic breaks, while businesses could plan around slower seasons.

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## Step 5: Foodservice Directors at the Core

A successful renovation is a direct reflection of the foodservice director’s involvement. Your leadership and vision are essential throughout the process.

**Stay Current on Trends:**

Keep up with innovations in school foodservice designs. From modular serving counters to flexible hot/cold options, the adaptability of new equipment should directly align with your operational goals. You need to know what equipment is helping create a better flow for your students to claim ownership and participation in the program. This ensures students receive the right portions, helping to reduce food waste.

**Know What You Want with Consultants:**

Confidence is key when interacting with consultants. They may offer solutions based on familiarity, but only you can define what works best for your school and students. Do your research before!

**Visit Other Schools and Their Social Pages:**

Touring other schools and district kitchens can provide valuable insights into what works—and what doesn't—in real-world settings. Seeing how others have approached their serving line renovations can help you refine your ideas and make more informed decisions. Additionally, exploring other schools' social media pages can spark fresh ideas – especially for what to serve on your menu.

**Explore Trending Restaurants and Nearby College Campuses**

For fresh inspiration, visit trending restaurants and nearby colleges or universities. These spaces often showcase innovative designs and layouts that can spark ideas for creating a modern, student-friendly serving line.

**Tour Showrooms and Test Kitchens**

Before committing to any renovation or equipment purchase, touring showrooms is a must. Showrooms allow you to see equipment in action, compare options, and better understand how different solutions might fit into your space. This hands-on experience is invaluable for making confident, informed decisions.

**Engage with Brokers/Reps and Dealers**

Building relationships with industry professionals is critical. Reps, brokers, and dealers can offer expert advice, answer your questions, and guide you through the decision-making process. Their knowledge of equipment and design trends can help you avoid common pitfalls and make choices that align with your needs.

**If You Are a New Foodservice Director:**

Partner with a manufacturer that offers clear, transparent resources like inspiration guides and ongoing support throughout the process. It's essential to maintain open communication with your manufacturer and other stakeholders, such as dealers, to ensure alignment and avoid last-minute mistakes. The last thing you want is to discover during installation that the serving line won't work as planned.

You don't know what you don't know—and that's okay. The key is to stay open and comfortable asking questions about foodservice equipment and the renovation process. By seeking clarity and guidance, you'll not only gain confidence but also make the entire experience smoother and more manageable.

Many foodservice directors feel uncertain because they lack the knowledge or a trusted partner to guide them. This is where the right support system makes all the difference. Brokers, dealers, and

manufacturers are eager to help foodservice directors find their voices, navigate the complexities of renovations, and make informed decisions that lead to successful outcomes. Don't hesitate to lean on their expertise—they're here to ensure you succeed.

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## An Estimated Renovation Timeline*

Here's a practical timeline to guide your serving line renovation from concept to completion:

**1. Initial Planning Phase (6-12 months):**

- Define your vision and consult brokers.
- Develop a schematic design that addresses all of your goals and intentions for improvement.
- Develop rough budgets and infrastructure assessments.
- Present to decision-makers and fellow leaders within your program.

**2. Final Planning (3-6 months):**

- Finalize design plans and budgets.
- Present to decision-makers/fellow leaders and obtain final approvals.

**3. Procurement/Ordering Equipment (1-2 months):**

- Solicit bids or purchase through contracts/buying groups.
- Order equipment and confirm delivery schedules.
- To ensure the best equipment lead times for summer installations, aim to complete this process by February or March. Keep in mind that May through August are peak manufacturing months, so it's best to order your project early.

**4. Manufacturing, Delivery and Installation (10-16 weeks depending upon project size):**

- Coordinate installation with minimal service disruption.
- Oversee daily progress and address issues as they arise.
- Ensure infrastructure improvements and site preparation are on track for timely delivery and installation.

**5. Pre-Opening/Completion (1-3 weeks prior to opening date):**

- Burn off, test, and clean the equipment.
- Complete final inspections and punch list.
- Conduct staff training on new equipment.

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## Key Takeaways

- Start with a clear idea and involve external stakeholders at the earliest stage for accurate planning.
- Foodservice directors play a central role—stay informed, confident, and engaged at every step.
- Be flexible with timelines and leverage long-term planning to minimize disruption.
- Close collaboration with brokers, manufacturers, and decision-makers is critical to keeping projects aligned and on track.

By following this roadmap, you'll transform your serving line into a modern, efficient space that enhances your operations and creates a better experience for your students. Whether you're just starting to explore ideas or are ready to dive into planning, the key to success is taking that first step with the right support.

From concept to installation, we're here to guide and support you every step of the way, making the process seamless and stress-free. Reaching out early in the planning stages is crucial—this is when our resources can help you clarify your vision, identify challenges, and create a customized timeline tailored to your specific needs.

If you're unsure where to start or need a customized timeline estimate tailored to your specific needs, don't hesitate to reach out!

**Timelines may vary from project to project.*

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**About The Author:**

With over 25 years in the foodservice industry, Tracie brings a well-rounded perspective shaped by hands-on experience. As a previous K-12 food service director, then moving into the equipment side as a manufacturer's representative, Tracie has seen the industry from every angle. Now at Multiteria, that experience fuels a deep passion for solving real-world challenges with practical, customer-focused solutions.

Whether working directly with school nutrition teams or supporting sales professionals behind the scenes, Tracie is known for building connections, sharing knowledge, and always putting the customer first. Driven by purpose, Tracie brings energy, experience, and a collaborative spirit to every project.