

Pull Up a Chair to Discuss Your Next Serving Line: Approving Specs and Drawings with Trusted Allies by Your Side

Insights from Jason Carroll and Tracie Samp, SNS

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Jason: Welcome! If you're a K-12 foodservice director, this message is for you. Let's get straight to the point—approving specs and drawings for your serving line project isn't just a formality. It's a critical step that directly impacts your timeline. If you delay or miss your deadline, your counters won't get installed on time, throwing your entire project off track.

Tracie: That's absolutely right, Jason. As a former foodservice director, I've seen the fallout firsthand: serving lines that don't fit the space, utility mismatches that halt installations, and missed deadlines that leave cafeterias scrambling to serve students. These aren't just inconveniences; they're costly disruptions that can leave your staff overwhelmed and your students frustrated. And the ripple effects? They can last for years, creating inefficiencies and operational headaches long after the project is done.

Jason: The stakes couldn't be higher, but here's the good news: you have the power to keep your project on time and on budget. By carefully reviewing specs and drawings, asking the right questions, and working closely with your team, you can avoid these pitfalls and ensure your serving line is ready when you need it. Let's dive in and make sure you're set up for success, because when it comes to your cafeteria, there's no room for delays or costly mistakes.

1. Setting the Scene: Who Sits at the Table?

Jason: You know, when you first tackle a serving line project, it feels like you're opening the door to a big, loud room. There's a whole cast involved: manufacturer's reps, equipment dealers, general contractors, architects, and consultants. Each role matters—the rep helps you understand the equipment, the dealer manages purchases and logistics, the architect turns dreams into blueprints, and contractors build it all out. But here's where it starts: What do you want your line to do, and how do you want it to look and feel?

Tracie: Couldn't agree more, Jason. And let's not forget, your role as a foodservice director will look a little different depending on your district size. In big districts, you might be in a room with a whole team. In smaller districts, it might be you advocating for your needs. I've been on both sides, sometimes collaborating with the architect or consultant, and other

times advocating for a redesign based on how things truly flow during lunch service. Nobody knows your operation better than you do, and that experience is gold.

Jason: Here's the thing—depending on whether it's a new build, a remodel, or a replacement, your involvement as a foodservice director will shift. New builds often mean consultants and architects drive a lot early on. With replacements? You're usually much more hands-on. Either way, this project is about your program.

Tracie: And don't ever let this mountain of details keep you out of the conversation. Your voice is powerful! Whether you need to nudge your superintendent, tap a trusted rep, or just get gutsy and make yourself heard, your insight should be shaping every step. After all, you know your students, staff, and what makes your cafeteria tick.

2. The Approval Roadmap: Vision, Design, and Workflow

Jason: The whole approval journey is really about making sure the end result fits your school's needs. If you've had a seat at the table—even if all you did was sketch an idea on the back of a napkin or have a phone call with your dealer—you're setting yourself up for success. Don't wait. Ask to review everything that comes your way. Clear, honest communication early on is the secret sauce, whether it's kicking off a design, tweaking plans, or pushing back on something that doesn't feel right.

Tracie: Start with that “what-if” vision! What do you want your students and team to experience in the space? That vision is your north star. Work with your manufacturers, reps, dealers, facilities department... all those people you trust. And dive deep: think about menu changes, student flow, ADA accommodations, even the little things like where to place condiment carts or give kids breathing room behind the line.

Jason: I've seen too many projects where a consultant just copies what worked somewhere else. “This'll do,” they say, but every cafeteria is not the same as the other. Don't be afraid to wave the flag if something feels off. Call it out—you're the voice for your program.

Tracie: Custom or modular serving lines are a commitment—once they're in, they're in! Take the time to measure twice, even three times, and double-check utility needs. It can be daunting, especially for a big project, but just remember—you've got a whole crew of experts waiting to help.

3. Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Jason: I'll say it again—the biggest misstep is being left out or not speaking up around specs. If you haven't seen them, ask. If they're confusing, grab your dealer or manufacturer's rep for a walk-through. That's what they're there for!

Tracie: I've felt that nervous energy myself—serving lines aren't just another purchase. They're the anchor of your front-of-house and a long-term investment. Reading specs can feel overwhelming, but if you hesitate or feel lost, reach out to your rep, call your facilities lead, or loop in anyone who can help decode the paperwork. They'll help you compare options accurately and walk you through the details to ensure everything aligns with your needs. Remember, there's absolutely no shame in raising your hand.

Jason: And a note for the foodservice directors dealing with replacements: you're paying these partners for a reason. Lean on them! Let them walk you through the technical details and spot any gaps before it's too late.

Tracie: For those new to the scene or working on smaller teams—never underestimate the value of a good local manufacturer's rep. They're more than salespeople; they're your local guides and lifelines throughout the process.

4. Who Has the Final Say? Navigating Authority and Standards

Tracie: In big districts, maybe it's you and your team signing off. Smaller districts might see superintendents or facility teams holding the pen. No matter your chain of command, remember: you are the expert in how the space works daily.

Jason: If you control the budget, take the time to check every spec and detail before signing. And if you don't, lean into that collaboration—find that facilities contact or superintendent and make sure your needs are heard. I've seen plenty of new equipment collect dust because no one checked its fit with the program needs. Let's keep that from happening to you.

Tracie: Worried about codes and compliance? That's why your team includes reps, dealers, and consultants! They know venting, ADA issues, and local quirks. Tag in your facilities pros for drainage, electrical, all those puzzle pieces. When in doubt, call in a local building official for a gut check.

Jason: Never feel pressured to know every code. Your trusted team has your back, and all of these experts are only a call or email away—especially when you need peace of mind for final signoff.

Tracie: And keep an eye open for ongoing learning—factory tours with equipment manufacturers, networking, even quick chats with other foodservice directors. The more you know, the more you can confidently steer your team (and students) toward what’s next.

5. Collaboration and Building Your Support Network

Jason: I can’t say it enough—serving line projects are successful when you build a real team. Your architect, local dealer, trusted rep, contractors, and especially your facilities team all make up your support crew.

Tracie: Ask a million questions—seriously. Bring people together for on-site meetings, walk the space, and flag any blind spots. The best outcomes happen when you keep the conversation going until you feel good about every decision.

Jason: The costliest mistakes usually crop up when someone skips the extra review or keeps quiet about a concern. Don’t be that someone. Early, candid communication can save you money, time, and headaches.

Tracie: And your facilities folks? They catch those subtle details—wrong utility outlets, awkward workflow—which means you can avoid surprises at install. Don’t forget to loop them in for every step.

Jason: Think of your network as your own “super team”: the dealer knows equipment; the rep is the walking encyclopedia of the options; contractors know construction headaches; and your facilities team guards the day-to-day smooth operation.

Tracie: And don’t underestimate your foodservice community—state associations, peer directors, or the school across town. Sometimes the best advice comes from someone who just went through the same approval process!

6. Real Experiences & Lessons Learned

Jason: Story time! A small school in Minnesota needed a serving line revamp. I arrived with a manufacturer’s rep, and together we got our hands dirty measuring and discussing what truly mattered to the team. By trimming the “nice-to-haves” and focusing on what actually

added value, we created a space that fit their needs and budget. No regrets—just a line that worked.

Tracie: I've had those boots-on-the-ground moments, too. As a foodservice director, I helped guide a kitchen's transformation from high school to middle school. It was all because we shaped it around staff and student workflow—something only someone living the program could articulate. The pride when that project finished? Unforgettable.

Jason: One Illinois district even had their foodservice director visit our factory. They saw the equipment up close and requested tweaks before we built it. That little bit of extra investment up front made all the difference once installation day arrived.

Tracie: And don't forget—sometimes your best resource is another director a few miles away. A quick chat or visit to see what they did can spark ideas, give you confidence, and help you steer clear of mistakes that cost time and money.

7. Final Thoughts: Don't Go It Alone—The Foodservice Director's Checklist

Tracie: If you take away nothing else, please remember this: you are *never* on an island. There are so many people—equipment manufacturers, facilities pros, reps, dealers—all here to back you up. First time reviewing specs, or just feeling wobbly? Reach out. We want to help.

Jason: Here's a checklist you can start using right now:

1. **Clarify the Project Scope:** Figure out if this is a new build, remodel, or replacement. That determines so much of your next step.
2. **Get Involved Early:** The sooner you raise your voice, the more you can guide layout, workflow, and details for your team.
3. **Build Strong Partnerships:** Trust and open communication with your dealer, rep, architect, contractor, and facilities team are the safety net when things get hairy.
4. **Double-Check Everything:** Specs, utilities, footprints, traffic flow—make sure it all passes your operations check.
5. **Stay Educated:** Sign up for a conference, take a factory tour, or connect with another foodservice director online. New products and codes keep rolling in.

- 6. Pause Before You Approve:** Take a breath. Review each part. Make sure you feel good about it before you sign anything.

Tracie: I can't say it enough. Having this conversation with you, Jason, and everyone reading along is a joy. We all get better by talking, sharing, and learning together.

Jason: There's no "cookie-cutter" cafeteria plan. Your leadership, input, and willingness to speak up will turn those drawings into a space where students and staff thrive.

Tracie: Let's be clear—approving specs and drawings isn't just a step in the process; it's the key to keeping your project on track. If you delay or miss your deadline, your counters won't get installed on time. That means your cafeteria could be left incomplete when school starts, forcing your staff to scramble for temporary solutions—or worse, leaving students without a functional serving line.

Jason: Missed deadlines don't just cause headaches, they create a domino effect. Delayed installations lead to rushed fixes, increased costs, and disruptions that can throw your entire foodservice program into chaos. And once the timeline slips, it's incredibly hard to recover. This is why your approval is so critical, it's the green light that keeps everything moving forward.

Tracie: The decisions you make now will determine whether your serving line is ready when your school needs it. This isn't just about getting it done; it's about getting it done on time. Every day you delay sign-off risks pushing back installation, leaving your team and students to deal with the fallout.

Jason: So, don't wait. Your leadership in this process is what ensures your serving line is installed, operational, and ready to serve your students on day one. Timely approvals aren't just important, they're essential to the success of your project. You're not just approving specs and drawings; you're ensuring your cafeteria is ready to meet the needs of your school community. With the right team by your side, you can make it count.

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About The Author:

Having 30 years of experience in the construction industry, Jason brings a unique perspective in dealing with Lakeside and Multiteria clients. Jason has worked closely with many companies ranging from dealers, general contractors, architects and building owners in that time. His career has been built on creating paths to connect good people and adding the value of great products.

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