Determining optimal hours of operation
“Y a gotta know the territory,” say the traveling salesmen in the *The Music Man*. Operators looking to change hours and days of operation must understand what their market will support—in other words, know the territory—before moving forward.

Before joining the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Dr. Brian Bergquist worked in independent and corporate restaurants, relying on market research to drive decision-making. “We didn’t make decisions without the data to back them up,” said Bergquist, the director of the School of Hospitality Leadership.

Operators “have to know their market and where they’re going to make the most money,” he said. They have to analyze revenue and compare it to the cost of labor to determine if it’s worth it to stay open. “You have to crunch the numbers to make a good decision.”

Operators, over the years, have clung to a set and unwavering schedule. Few were open on the major holidays.

Rejecting most traditions, Millennials are looking for more options, more selections, more hours. Convenience rules.

Many operators are finding they’re having to play follow the leader. Operators are worried that if they’re closed, the customer will go someplace else and worse, get in the habit of doing so. “Habit is the meat and potatoes of business,” he said.

Cheri Schweitzer, owner of Credible Consulting which assists restaurants in two areas, food safety and operations, helps “people get out of trouble or stay out of trouble.” For clients looking to improve their bottom lines, she reviews six months of point of sale data looking for trends. “If you’re consistently not making money on a Monday, maybe you should close,” she said.

Before adding or subtracting day parts, Schweitzer encourages reviewing food and labor costs. See if tweaking the menu improves the bottom line.

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With national chains adding all-day breakfast, independent operators can offer brunch—assuming, of course that their menus and customers can support it. “Brunch can be an enormous revenue generator on Sundays,” said Schweitzer. “It adds another branch of income and a whole other day part.”

**Holiday happenings**
Thanksgiving and Christmas used to mean gathering together with extended family and eating large, homecooked meals. No longer. “More and more Americans are going out to eat on major holidays,” said Schweitzer.

The Audubon Inn in Mayville is now open on Thanksgiving and Christmas and sees those days as real opportunities for revenue generation. Keith Hill, a seasoned operator who ran locations in New England, California and New Orleans took over the 120-year-old hotel and restaurant three years ago.

Originally closed two days a week and on holidays, the Inn is now open seven days a week as well as on holidays, a bit of adjustment not only for the staff, but also for the community.

The first Thanksgiving buffet had few takers; the second showed improvement. “We’re expecting great things this year,” said Hill.

If you’re considering opening on the holidays, don’t expect an onslaught of business the first year. Schweitzer recommends being open for two or three years to give momentum time to build. “Go in with a commitment for three years and then assess it,” she said.

Some operators are remaining open for the winter holidays but closing for the summer ones. “I saw a lot of people close on Labor Day in Madison this year,” Schweitzer noted. July 4th is also a good day to close—unless, of course, the parade goes by your restaurant.

Smokey’s Club in Madison closes for 10 days in August and another 10 days at Christmas as well as July 4th and Thanksgiving. “Going way back, my dad wanted to go up North and see family,” said Tom Schmock, president, explaining the expanded closures. “It’s been that

“More and more Americans are going out to eat on major holidays.”

Cheri Schweitzer
Credible Consulting
way for 63 years and we’re reluctant to change.”

Change may not be in the cards at Smokey’s but Schmock is also co-partner, along with his brother, of the Blue Moon Bar & Grill, located down the street that’s open 365 days a year. The decision to remain open is based on the same criteria that Smokey’s uses—tradition and revenue.

Holidays are themed with a menu item paired with a particular beer. Last year, it offered Zombie Beer from Indiana for its “Zombie Christmas.” Operators “have to do something that’s going to attract customers again and again,” said Stout’s Bergquist.

Edward Carella, corporate director of restaurants for Marcus Hotels & Resorts and former general manager of the Mason Street Grill, noted that the corporation has a “dynamic, diverse portfolio” of 40 restaurants located throughout the country. The hours of operation for each of them depends upon the market they’re in.

Weekday lunches at a fine dining restaurant in a business district, such as the Mason Street Grill, are very busy. But few people are willing to travel to the area for lunch on a weekend so the Grill is only open for dinner on Saturdays and Sundays. “We understand who our demographic is with our concept,” he said.

Holidays have created a new revenue stream for many of the Marcus properties including Mason Street. “Some of our busiest days of the year are Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day,” said Carella, with operators offering a special prix fixe menu or buffet with one-of-a-kind selections.

Mason Street rotates staff so that one or a small group of individuals don’t have to work all the holidays. Those who do work are rewarded with a special “family” meal either before or after the crush of customers. Staff who work on Thanksgiving are given the next three days off; all those working holidays receive holiday pay.

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Against the grain
Chico Pope, owner of the Buckhorn Supper Club in Milton, claims that the restaurant is one of the few places that limits its hours. “When we bought the restaurant 20 years ago, the previous owner was only open Friday night, Saturday night and Sunday noon and night”—hours he found the most profitable.

Pope admitted he didn’t listen to him. “The first two years I was open Thursday through Sunday and then added a few more days in the summer.”

After re-evaluating the market and revenue, the Buckhorn is now only open Friday through Sunday—with the exception of being open on Thursdays in the summer. The last Tuesdays and Wednesdays of the summer months Pope serves a popular lobster boil that typically has a waiting list.

Extended hours
Unlike the Buckhorn, there are many restaurants that are open seven days a week and others open round-the-clock. The seven corporate and 23 franchise locations of George Webb are open 24 hours. “It’s part of who we are,” said Ryan Stamm, vice president at George Webb corporate. “It’s part of our charm, part of our history.”

Staffing third shift can be a challenge although some locations have long-term staff who prefer the late night hours. “Sometimes the third shift works for their schedule,” he added.

The corporate locations close on Christmas Day and franchises are allowed to do so as well. “It’s something we’ve done for a long time so that the staff can be with their families,” he said. “But sometimes we’ll have locations that want to stay open. They put up a sign-up sheet and look for volunteers that day.”

Short Stack Eatery is open from 7 a.m. on Thursdays to 11 p.m. on Sundays for a total of 88 straight hours. As its name implies, the Madison-based restaurant serves only “sweet” or “savory” breakfasts. Within each of those two categories are five or six dishes that can be accompanied by alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.

Business partners Alex Lindenmeyer and Sinead McHugh opened Short Stack in 2014 after realizing that Madison had no place for a late night breakfast that was close to campus. Their slogan hits home the concept: “Eighty eight hours straight. Thursday to Sunday. All Breakfast. All the damn time.”

Whether you’re open extended hours or limited hours, serve all meals or just one, when to be open is a difficult decision and can change over time. It requires the consideration of many variables and sometimes is a trial and error process. But finding that sweet spot of the hours that work best for the restaurant and the market can really make a difference. WR

“You have to crunch the numbers to make a good decision.”

Dr. Brian Bergquist
UW-Stout