



Embracing the opportunities

Michael Flatow FCSI's big break came in 1992 when he consulted on a mega project in newly unified Berlin. Since then, his business has gone from strength to strength, but the road hasn't always been smooth, he tells Elly Earls

Flatow & Drews Consulting is a Germany-based technical foodservice consultancy built on its team's decades of experience in engineering and turnkey installations of kitchen and laundry projects. Its international clients range from high profile hotel chains, including Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt, to airline catering providers and corporate cafeterias.

It all started when co-founder Michael Flatow FCSI was at university in Berlin. While studying industrial engineering, he opened two restaurants and a bar in what, at the time, was West Berlin, getting a taste of what it looked like to run a foodservice business – from the cooking to the finances. Upon graduating in 1977, he decided to combine this experience with his engineering degree and took a job with renowned German kitchen and laundry contractor

Silber Herthel, which counted Grosvenor House in London among its clients.

Five years down the line, the owner of Silber Herthel sold the company and founded a new one, KEP Servotel, which Flatow took over in 1985 as managing partner. It was there he gained much of the experience that would later prove crucial to the success of Flatow & Drews Consulting.

Fast forward to 1992. The Berlin Wall had not long come down and big developments had started popping up all around the newly unified capital. Flatow was enlisted to take over the design work for one of these, Potsdamer Platz, a mega project that was to feature a Grand Hyatt, a Marriott, a Ritz Carlton, a casino and a theatre.

"We were lucky, perhaps," he recalls. "It all started from the Potsdamer Platz. It's there we learned the guidelines of certain major hotel chains. Due to our

called Mecca), which will include two developments, Jabal Al Kaaba, a four-star hotel consisting of three towers, and Kaaki Land, a three-star property made up of five buildings.

Common requests

According to Flatow, his consultancy's engineering expertise – most of the team are engineering graduates – and their more than 30 years of experience in turnkey kitchen projects set them apart from the competition. "We are very well set up in the value engineering phase and clearly everybody wants to save a little bit of money. We can give them alternative proposals to the norm," he says. "Due to

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our engineering background, we are also very proficient when it comes to coordinating with mechanical, electrical and plumbing (MEP) consultants. We're able to deliver special documents to them so sites can be prepared exactly according to clients' demands."

The consultancy is often asked to set up world-class catering operations in expensive cities such as London, Paris and Rome, which, due to space constraints, must frequently be located in the basement. "The ground floor in these hotels has to be used as outlets – shops and restaurants – so the back of house has to go downstairs, which presents problems because, according to work safety issues, these kitchens must have daylight. There are many challenges to meet," Flatow says.

Waste is another issue that needs additional consideration when kitchens are located underground. Flatow & Drews >

Above left: The Clock Tower development, Makkah, Saudi Arabia.
Above: SIXTY restaurant in Moscow

references there, we then had contacts with international hotel chains and were recommended to other projects."

These included high-profile hotel projects both in Germany and further afield. Flatow & Drews Consulting was founded in 2002, and their next mega project came in 2013, when they were appointed as foodservice and laundry consultant for the Clock Tower development in Saudi Arabia, which included a Raffles, a Fairmont and a Swissotel, among several other hotels.

Currently, the consultancy is working on three projects on the Canary Islands, The Address Hotel in Istanbul and a new project planned to accommodate more pilgrims in the Saudi holy city of Makkah (the transliteration the Saudi government use for what we previously

Consulting generally addresses this by installing state-of-the-art waste disposal concepts, capable of pumping waste from below ground directly to disposal trucks.

Other common focus areas of hotel clients include smart energy and ventilation systems, which automatically switch on and off when needed, and back of house labour savings.

Flatow & Drews Consulting's team is well able to cope with these requests. It's made up of a project manager who previously worked for Lufthansa airline catering, where hygiene was a top priority, an engineer who specialises in total waste management concepts, an AutoCAD specialist and an FCSI-

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accredited contractor based in Turkey, who is responsible for coordinating the Makkah projects.

Of course, building strong relationships with the other freelancers and contractors involved in projects is part and parcel of success as a foodservice consultancy. Flatow says the most important collaborations are with MEP consultants, interior designers and architects, largely thanks to the growing popularity of show kitchens.

“Say a show kitchen has a metal work counter with a granite top and the kitchen equipment will be dropped into this granite top – we have to coordinate with the engineer and interior designer about how to combine them,” he explains. “Many hotel chains also want open-fire grill systems so the guests can see the flames – these require special ventilation systems, which need to be coordinated with the MEP contractors.”



Flatow & Drews' consultants can seamlessly collaborate with chefs to interior designers and MEP consultants

Staying agile

It hasn't been all smooth sailing for Flatow & Drews Consulting over the decades. The 2008 global recession led to a sharp decline in investment in foodservice, political unrest in countries such as Syria has cut certain contracts short and now, of course, the world is dealing with Covid-19.

“With the success of the hospitality industry related to the volume of international travel, projects have been put on hold,” Flatow says. “There is also hesitation from hotel developers and investors around setting up new projects. Plus, we have had to change the way we work to incorporate more home office and video conferencing and less travelling.”

Flatow & Drews Consulting has managed to weather these various storms by being agile and adapting to the situation. “For example, we tend to focus



KEY PROJECTS

Mega project: Potsdamer Platz Berlin, Germany

- Grand Hyatt Hotel
- Marriott Hotel
- Casino
- Stella Musical Theater/ Theater am Potsdamer Platz
- The Ritz Carlton Hotel

Mega project: Mecca, KSA

- Fairmont Makkah Clock Royal Tower
- Raffles Makkah Palace
- Swissôtel Makkah
- Abraj Al Bait Mall Makkah
- Holiday Inn Makkah Al Aziziah
- Sheraton Makkah Jabal Al Kaaba (ongoing)
- Anjum Hotel

a bit more on Europe now because it's a politically, safer area,” Flatow says. An exception would be Saudi Arabia, where tourism is a high priority at present.

“They're interested in getting tourists to come and visit their country as they want to become less dependent on the oil industry,” Flatow explains. “We're also focusing more on canteens and cafeterias, not only on hotel projects.”

The team also makes sure to identify the most important lessons each project has taught them and bring those new ideas forward to their other clients. “Working with international brands, we've learned a lot about different cultures, types of food and menus,” Flatow says. “For instance, we were involved in the Shangri-La Hotel in Paris, where we worked with a major Chinese chef. From our discussions with him, we learned a lot about designing a high-tech Chinese restaurant kitchen and we can



The popularity of show kitchens means collaboration with MEP consultants

now bring that experience to other hotel clients who might be wondering what to do for their speciality restaurant.”

Another big learning experience was the Clock Tower mega project in Saudi Arabia. “There, they have to serve 18,000 meals after sunset during Hajj and it's a big challenge to design a kitchen that can cope with that sort of volume,” he says.

New opportunities

While Covid-19 has delivered an enormous blow to the hospitality industry, Flatow also sees opportunities for his firm. The breakfast buffet, for example, may end up being a casualty of the pandemic, so hoteliers will be looking for new ways to serve breakfast safely. The Flatow & Drews Consulting team is currently working on developing new breakfast concepts.

There will also be much more focus not only on reducing the amount of contact points between staff and customers, but also between different staff members. “This is an issue we're addressing with our total waste concept systems,” Flatow says. “Leftover food doesn't go into the kitchen, it is sent to the stewarding area. From there it goes through the building in special stainless-steel pipes to the basement before being pushed pneumatically into a truck on the ground floor.”

With foodservice operators rethinking their technology stacks – whether by introducing contactless payment or new delivery and click-and-collect systems – there are likely to be opportunities for foodservice consultants on the digital engineering front.

“There are many more hotel brands focused on young people who are more interested in communication than a large hotel room,” Flatow says. “Instead of a reception desk, there might be an iPad, or even automated check-in. That increased use of technology is also going to translate to foodservice and there will be many opportunities to develop new concepts over the next few years.” ■