

CHAPTER 13

Service and Guest Relations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading and studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe characteristics of effective servers and greeters.
- Identify the seven commandments of customer service.
- List guidelines for handling customer complaints.



It is generally accepted that servers contribute as much to the dining experience as, or perhaps more than, the decor, appointments, background music, lighting, and even the food served.

Guest service, including guest recognition, is important for all restaurants, but particularly so for dinner houses and fine-dining restaurants because they offer more service.

When dining at a white-tablecloth restaurant or a casual burger joint, customers value good table service over any other aspect of the dining experience, according to a recent *Nation's Restaurant News* study.¹ Similarly, service quality is often the most frequent complaint made by restaurant patrons.

Guest relations is an aspect of marketing and sales. Some restaurants are able to become profitable within a few months by not spending a great deal of money on media advertising but by developing a signature complimentary appetizer that is delivered to the table as soon as guests are seated.

The psychology of foodservice as practiced by the server varies tremendously with the type of establishment, from the hot dog emporium to the deluxe dinner house. The teenager in Arby's is probably thrilled with working as a part of a team of other teenagers in an air-conditioned, well-lighted, well-appointed, and fast-paced establishment. The skills required are minimal: assembly of food orders, a few simple cooking skills, making change. Most important, though, is the customer contact and the pleasure in working with one's peers. Supervision is minimal; most of the motivation comes from the necessity of keeping up with customer demand.

Consider the more complex relationships and skills required in a dinner house. The dining area is usually broken into tables and booths. Each booth forms a separate environment and protects the territorial imperative, the walls visually blocking some stimuli and providing *social distance* from other patrons, facilitating social interaction among those seated within the booth. The booth can be thought of as providing social and psychological security while accentuating the need for group interaction. Group participants are physically forced to look at each other and focus attention on those sitting within the confines of the booth. Its very design establishes intimacy and makes for a more relaxed atmosphere.

The server standing at the head of the booth commands the attention of those seated and tends to interact with them as a group more than as individuals. Everyone hears what everyone else is saying, including what each orders. The server need not repeat answers to questions and can establish a rapport with the individuals as a group, answering questions, explaining the menu, and making suggestions.

Individuals entering a restaurant alone feel like outsiders, compared with the couples and parties. If seated at an exposed table, they may feel even more isolated and uncomfortable. However, the hostess or maitre d' is reluctant to tie up a booth with a single. If the individual is noticeably shy or ill at ease, the decision should be for the booth. One study found that solos appreciated and were made comfortable by fast, friendly service. They did not like sharing a table, nor did they want to be seated in a special section for singles. Men seemed to prefer

more attention from servers, while added service disturbed some women. Wine by the glass was appreciated. More women than men said they liked eating alone.

Servers can expect more problems from people seated in open spaces—more complaints about noisy people at neighboring tables, uneasiness, concern over speed of service, and defensive behavior.

Banquet rooms can be expected to produce the same sort of customer behavior. Very often customers are seated next to someone they know only casually, or not at all. It usually takes an aggressive, self-assured person to break the ice of separateness.

Low lighting is favorable for the dinner house, encouraging people to relax and breaking down social distance. Low lighting is also more sustainable, and reduces the costs associated with bright standard incandescent lighting. In a darkened room, people are encouraged to speak and eat more intimately and to focus on those in the party rather than on the distractions of people entering, leaving, or moving around. In the fast-food establishment and in the coffee shop, the lighting tends to be brighter, in keeping with the mood of the customer who wants to eat quickly and move on. Even these establishments are switching over to low lighting. Some Energy Star–qualified light fixtures meeting EPA guidelines for energy efficiency generate approximately 75 percent less heat than standard incandescent lighting.²

Service Encounter

Many servers are skilled performers in the *service encounter*. The heart of a service is the encounter between the server and the customer. It is here where emotions meet economics in real time and where most people judge the quality of service.³ The dinner house, and especially the lounge, is the stage. Two shows daily—lunch and dinner—deliver the same great performance every time. The server and the guest are both actors in the play. Both knowingly engage in the drama. The payoff for the guest is a feeling of warmth, friendship, and ego enhancement. The reward for the server is the big tip and the excitement of the drama. Matters of service and what constitutes good service are subjective to be sure. In the end, though, the customer's perception is what counts.⁴

For some servers, the play is the thing. They know they are acting and love it. They may also “love” their customers. The guests feed back similar feelings to generate a staged love affair. All smiles and attention, the server hangs on guests' every word and gesture, radiating goodwill and the desire to please.

Once the meal is finished, the play is over, the guest leaves, and the server moves on to the next stage. Should the guest and server meet in the supermarket the next morning, they may scarcely acknowledge each other.

If the dinner house adds liquor to the environment, guests may experience loosening inhibitions, clouded perceptions, and a reduction in anxiety and hostility. Voices rise, suppressed needs surface, conversations become animated, ego guards are lowered, jokes are funnier. This increases the need for restaurant



Alex von Bidder,
coowner of

Four Seasons Restaurant, sometimes makes personal phone calls to his closest guests when their patronage drops. His intention is to show that he cares and to inquire about the guests' welfare. Those phone calls give guests an opportunity to discuss any service failure they may have experienced. By making the calls, von Bidder personalizes his service and gathers relevant information.

Source: Beth G. Chung and K. Douglas Hoffman. "Critical Incidents: Service Failures That Matter Most." Cornell University School of Hotel Administration Online. www.hotelschool.cornell.edu. June 27, 2006

owners, managers, and servers to become aware of and practice responsible alcoholic beverage service.

The traveling person eating alone is uneasy, especially in a dinner house where couples and groups are out having fun. Alienated and self-conscious, he or she wonders about the price of the meal and may order something more expensive than usual to let anyone who might be interested know that he or she can afford it. The traveler may want more rapid service, eating quickly and leaving as soon as possible.

The same person in a group, exhilarated by the presence of friends, can take on a completely different personality. Instead of being impersonal with the server, he or she is now friendly.

If the group is large and made up of relative strangers, as in a banquet setting, servers may become nonpersons. Guests may refer to them in the third person even though they are nearby and can overhear the comments. No one likes to be treated this way. Servers sometimes set themselves up for such treatment by displaying a lack of self-confidence, excessive deference, or over eagerness. Something in human nature, at least in some people, causes them to treat such people as inferiors and even to humiliate them.

Visitors to this country are surprised by the service, especially that given by college students. Many times, the financial and educational level of the server is higher than that of the guests.

Gamesmanship

In restaurants with snob appeal, guest and server may play a little game: One puts the other down. Guests unaccustomed to frequenting such establishments may be impressed by the aloofness of the maitre d', the captain, and the server and may hasten to overtip, more in fear than for service rendered. Many servers look on the guest-server relationship as a battle of wits. The guest is the opponent. The object of the game is to extract the maximum tip possible. At the end of each evening, word is passed as to who received the most in tips. "Ashley made \$290 tonight." "Jordan took in only \$145 in tips." If servers are pitted against each other and the prizes are for who gets the most tips, it is easy for a dining room to degenerate into a game with the guest as secondary participant. Sometimes it seems as if supper clubs were designed more for the servers than for diners. Perhaps diners like it that way. Certainly the server becomes a star, receiving \$200 or more in tips in an evening (which may not sit well with the hardworking kitchen crew and busers, whose compensation is considerably less).

One way to ensure harmony among all of the restaurant's personnel is to insist that all tips be pooled and everyone share. Customarily, servers decide on the amounts distributed from the tip pool to busers. Usually the kitchen crew is excluded. In other establishments, all share on a fixed-ratio basis, a practice common in Europe and the Middle East; this is called the TRONC (trunk or box) system. Union contracts usually prohibit the pooling of tips. Tipped employees cannot be required to contribute more of their tips to a pool than is "customary and reasonable" in the locality in which they work.⁵



WHAT MAKES A GOOD SERVER?

There is a lot of agreement as to what makes a good server. Here are five attributes that restaurateurs look for:

1. *Personality.* It's fine to know the technical aspects of service, but the guest puts more emphasis on the attitude and personality of the server.
2. *Team orientation.* Servers must be willing to participate in a team effort. They have to be willing to contribute to the guests' satisfaction, whether they are in the server's section or not.
3. *Technical knowledge of product.* Servers must have thorough knowledge of both the food and the wine. They need to have tableside confidence.
4. *Ability to read guests and anticipate their needs.* Some guests want lots of attention; others do not want to have their conversation interrupted by a server.
5. *Knowledge of the finer points of service.*

Greeters

The host is the first and last person the guest meets at a restaurant, so naturally the impression he or she makes is important. A smiling, well-groomed, friendly person is an asset to the restaurant, but the position calls for more. Hosts who know the restaurant add luster and are able to answer a variety of specific and general questions. The main part of the host's job is to represent the restaurant by offering a friendly greeting and facilitating the seating of guests, even if it means politely asking them to wait a while in the lounge or holding area. Being a great host is an art and takes practice. Another key aspect of the job is knowing how to seat guests so as not to overload a server or the kitchen. That is where experience comes in.

Hosts keep a sheet for reservations, whether they are called in or walk-ins. The sheet has several columns, each representing a table size or *top*, as it is called in the restaurant business—one column for two-tops or *deuces*, one for four-tops, one for six-tops, and one for larger parties. Names of parties are entered under the respective table size. Over time, restaurants gauge their turn time. For example, the deuce waiting time will be faster than that of the four- or six-tops. Full-service restaurants normally allow about 1½ hours for a deuce, 2 hours for a four-top, and 2½ hours for a six-top.

In order to avoid calling out names—and thus annoying other guests—some restaurants give guests a beeper device that lets them know when their table is ready. Hosts know when the table is ready by receiving a signal from the server. If waiting guests have opened a bar tab, it is preferable to transfer that over to the food server to avoid the inconvenience of the guests having to pay the closeout bar tab when being seated. Any beverages from the lounge/holding area should be carried on a tray to the dining area by the hostess. Here, the service calls for a way to remember who was drinking what so as to place the correct beverage in front of each guest.



From the moment guests call

to make a phone reservation to the moment they are walking out the door, they judge a restaurant not just on food but on customer service. Great customer service is what brings them back.

On arrival at the table, the host might pull out the best seat, perhaps a window view. This seat is normally offered to and occupied by the senior woman of the party. The hostess then assists others in being seated and offers their menus.

A number of restaurants have service standards that they expect to meet or beat. Here are 11 steps of service that set a standard for all to meet:

1. Greet guests within one minute.
2. Suggestively sell beverages/take order.
3. Bring beverages by four minutes.
4. Offer to explain the specials and other menu items.
5. Bring appetizers/soups/salads by six minutes.
6. Bring entrées by 15 minutes.
7. Check that everything is perfect within two minutes.
8. Take dessert order.
9. Bring dessert by four minutes.
10. Check everything is perfect.
11. Upon guest request, present the check within two minutes.

Standards like these give servers something to aim for and achieve because otherwise service will be below guest expectations.

Server as Independent Businessperson



Experienced servers learn to

read guests and react accordingly. Some guests are in a hurry, some want advice on what to order. Good service means subtle, unobtrusive service. For example, there is no need for the server to arrive at the table with a handful of plates asking who's having what.

It is too easy to set servers up as private businesspersons, each doing his or her own thing—in effect, operating an independent business on premises leased for nothing. One human resources director—who had better remain anonymous—calls servers “soldiers of fortune.” Such a situation can foster competition rather than cooperation. If any situation calls for teamwork, it is a fast-paced dining room, which requires working in harmony, goodwill, and trust. It is much easier and faster for two service people to serve a party of six than it is for one, and more fun. Normally, a server cannot carry more than four plates, and if it is necessary to make two trips to the kitchen to serve six people, two of the plates will get cold. A party of six or eight usually starts each course together. If they have to wait for all to receive the salad, then all to receive the entrée and, finally, the dessert, the delays become troublesome.

Foodservice Teams

Various kinds of dining room service organization exist, the server/buser combination being the most common. Some restaurants operate with servers working two to a team so that at least one team member is on the floor most of the time dealing with the patrons rather than off the floor.

The *team* system differs from the usual server-buser relationship in that buspersons ordinarily confine their work to cleaning and setting up tables. In other situations, the entire serving crew works as a team. Anyone entering the kitchen

picks up any order and delivers it, and if a table needs more than one server to flame a dish or to perform other duties, the servers in the general area will pitch in, even though it removes them from their assigned stations. A slogan—“Full Hands In, Full Hands Out”—helps everyone work to help each other.

The team system has one major advantage: Hot food is served hot. Whoever is nearest the setup counter picks up the food and serves it. The check accompanies the order; the number of the table is written on the check. Seats at each table are numbered clockwise, starting at the seat closest to an agreed-on anchor point.

Stations where two servers rotate tables encourage teamwork because each is paying attention to the customers to see when the next table will be leaving, trying to get them out the door.



COMEBACK KIDS

There's a story of a group of diners at a restaurant. Everyone's ordering a number of items to pass around, but one customer wants to mix and match an appetizer with an entrée. “Oh, we can't

do special orders,” apologizes the server. “Why not?” asks the customer. “The chefs really get mad at me,” the server responds. “They won't do it even one time

because if you should ever come back, you might want it again.”

Source: Jennifer Waters, “Eye on Service,” Restaurants and Institutions 108, December 1, 1988, no. 28, p. 46.



Foodservice at Le Bec-Fin, in Philadelphia, makes for a memorable experience. Here servers lift the cover off dishes presented to guests

Hard Sell versus Soft Sell

Restaurant literature and educational programs uniformly urge service personnel to promote and sell as part of the service job. The rationale is that sales and tips will increase—and, if the sales job is done correctly, guests will have a better dining experience. Discussions with servers bear out the thesis, but there are some qualifications. Undoubtedly, some patrons have a fixed idea of how much they will spend on a particular meal, and such people may resent a hard sell: “Would you like a cocktail?” “Will you have dessert?” “Will you have an after-dinner liqueur?” People may feel pressured and sometimes say so, especially if the server’s approach is the hard sell. Those who receive a higher check than expected may avoid the restaurant in the future.

The kind of clientele may determine the best approach, *hard or soft sell*. Low-key, complete service may be what is expected. Other patrons, wanting to live it up, may welcome the hard sell and purposely run up the tab as a kind of self-indulgence. “Nothing is too good for our anniversary”—or business client, or prospective buyer. The expense account (using the company’s money) is justification to order the finest!

Servers characteristically compete with each other in the amount of tips received in the course of a work shift. Some servers make 50 or even 100 percent more than others. The service rendered has been perceived by the diner as superior, or the server has manipulated the diner into increasing the check or the tip percentage, or both. Tip and tab go together. Management mostly pushes the thought, “When in doubt, promote.”

Aside from selling, service includes a number of other factors and practices, including showmanship, ritualization of wine service, paying attention to what is said by the diner, attention to detail, refilling water glasses, cleaning ashtrays, replacing soiled silver, and so on. The server is attempting to control the behavior of the diner. Call it manipulation, influencing attitude, making friends, maintaining rapport, or what have you, it is still selling. A server who displays skill and confidence is desirable. In most situations, a harassed or timid server may elicit sympathy but can also arouse apprehension or uneasiness in the guest. No doubt, a number of guests want to be courted and wooed, buttered up, and even fawned on. Others may resent this kind of behavior.

Seven Commandments of Customer Service

1. *Tell the truth:* When it comes to customer service, honesty is the best policy.
2. *Bend the rules:* Learn why a rule is a rule in the first place. Once you know the reason for the rule and its boundaries, go ahead and bend it, if that’s what it takes to make the system better serve your customer.
3. *Listen actively, almost aggressively:* Customers are ready, willing, and able to tell you everything you need to know. All you need to do is listen.

4. *Put pen to paper:* A letter or e-mail after a conversation can be a terrific way to confirm facts and details or just to say thanks.
5. *Master the moments of truth:* If you pay attention to details—the promises made in your advertising, how long your phone rings before being answered, the look of your parking lot—customers will know and notice.
6. *Be a fantastic fixer:* An effective customer-service recovery process includes these components: apologize, listen and empathize, fix the problem quickly and fairly, offer atonement, keep your promise, follow up.
7. *Never underestimate the value of a sincere thank-you:* It's easy to take regular and walk-in customers for granted. Don't. Customers have options every time they need a service or product. Thank them for choosing to do business with you.

Formality or Informality

How formal should the relations between host and guest be? Should the server be seen and not heard? Does the customer want *formality or informality*?

The answers vary with the kind of experience you are trying to deliver. Some restaurants thrive on informality. The servers may appear in tennis shoes and blue jeans, saying “Hi, I’m Bob, I’ll be your server tonight. Please call on me for anything that I can do to make your meal pleasant.”

In another, more formal atmosphere, the server may speak only when spoken to, with conversation limited to “Good evening, madam. Good evening, sir,” “I hope you enjoy your meal, madam,” and so on.

Some general principles apply to all restaurants.

- Restaurants, by their nature, are service oriented, and all personnel should accept this as a continuing challenge to give excellent service. Complaints should be accepted at face value, at least until proven to be without substance.
- The guest’s viewpoint is different from that of the employees or the manager. Most complaints are left unspoken. When a complaint *is* voiced, a public relations opportunity emerges. Food should be replaced at once with another of the same or of the customer’s choice. A complimentary bottle of wine or an after-dinner liqueur adds a gracious note.
- Never try to explain why things go wrong. A guest is not interested in excuses.
- The general atmosphere at a restaurant should be friendly. A warm smile is almost never out of place.
- Teamwork is always appropriate.
- The little extras, like a birthday cake or a Polaroid portrait of the diners, are almost always appreciated.

The famous maitre d' at the Waldorf Hotel in New York, Oscar, considered himself a stage manager and would often approach a table, examine the food, and, even if nothing was wrong, add some little touch or have it whisked away and replaced. He was widely known as Oscar of the Waldorf and produced a large cookbook, despite not being a chef. Today, he is known as the creator of veal Oscar, eggs Benedict, Waldorf salad, and for helping to popularize Thousand Island dressing. Waiters were trained to focus on him. Hand signals let the waiters know what to do. His mien expressed grave concern for guests' well-being. He was very polite, very formal, tuned in to each guest. The outcome of great customer service is customer loyalty.

Setting the Table

The table setting should be pleasing and inviting to the guest. Guests notice clean cutlery and flatware that is free from watermarks, fingerprints, and food particles. Avoid watermarks by cloth-drying the flatware immediately as it comes out of the dishwasher. Remember: To avoid fingerprints, train staff and servers to hold the cutlery flatware by the center-middle part.

Experienced maitre d's bend their knees to level themselves with the glassware and can spot a dirty one at a distance. Like cutlery, all glassware should be free of water spots and fingerprints. Dirty rinse water causes spots; chemicals in the rinse water can streak glassware. An improper mix of washing and sanitizing chemicals might lack the action that makes the water sheet off the glass without streaks or watermarks.

When the table setting is complete, it should look pleasing to the eye. This is accomplished by arranging everything symmetrically. Everything should be clean and free from fingerprints.



LESS CHOICE

Pare down the menu. People forget that service often relates to the time it takes for them to decide on what to order. Too many choices are too time-consuming to wade through.

Source: Jennifer Waters, "Hurry, Please," Restaurants and Institutions 108, May 1, 1998, no. 11, p. 119.

Taking the Order

If they have not already done so, servers introduce themselves and take the opportunity to suggest beverages. This is done by describing two or three drink items (depending on the guest). For business convention guests, this might be a special martini—if the bartender is known for that—or a choice of wines. The main



The table setting at Charlie Trotter's is a delight to the eye
Courtesy of Charlie Trotter

thing is to get people to make a selection from a variety of choices rather than a simple yes-no decision. At the initial guest contact moment, the server may also describe food specials, then depart to obtain the beverages while the guests decide on their food order.

The food order should be taken by asking the senior female for her order first, followed by the other women. (The server has to politely take control of the situation to prevent everyone from shouting his or her order.) Then the senior male's order is taken, and so on. The server's team takes the order by seat number from a vantage point (say, the entrance). This allows each plate to be placed correctly in front of the person who ordered the dish. Some restaurants use the clockwise system.

Restaurants generally have a rule as to which side food is served to and cleared from. Beverages are both served and cleared from the right-hand side from and to a tray. Some restaurants clear plates as soon as a person is done eating; others wait until everyone has finished. The method chosen is a matter of preference. It also depends on how busy the shift is and how soon you need the table. A quick system to ensure guests have a great experience is based on a popular acronym in this business: GUEST—Greet, Understand, Educate, Satisfy, and Thank.⁶

Magic Phrases

A coffee shop server leaves an indelible impression on the guest when she says, as the patron leaves, “I hope to see you tomorrow.” Phrases recommended at Suso restaurant for use by servers include:

Welcome back.
 We’re happy you’re here.
 It’s good to see you again.
 I hope you like it.
 I hope you enjoy it.
 May I take your plate?
 How was your evening?
 Sorry to have kept you waiting.
 I’m sorry; I’ll put that right.
 Have a nice trip home.

Other than the magic phrases, the next 10 server suggestions should be followed thoroughly (if appropriate, depending on the character and style of the restaurant concept).

1. Smile and introduce yourself within one minute.
2. Get down to eye level. Make *eye contact*.
3. Welcome the guests and explain something about the restaurant and any special beverages.
4. Help guests by explaining any entrée they inquire about.
5. Suggest/offer assistance with wine selection.
6. Follow the restaurant’s style of service. When serving entrées, use an “anchor” person as the number one, and then serve all plates starting with the eldest female guest. Or use the auction method of asking who’s having what (the what is the plate in your hand). Some casual restaurants like this method; formal restaurants use the anchor person method.
7. Constantly keep one eye on the table, as you never know when guests may need something.
8. Clear plates as you think guests need them cleared; don’t interrupt a conversation and don’t reach over/across someone.
9. Suggestively describe desserts and after-dinner beverages.
10. Write “thank you” on the back of the check. Doodle on the check, put a happy face on it, and use a tip tray.

Recommended replies in response to a complaint are:

I apologize.
 Thank you for letting us know about this.
 I’d feel the same way if I were in your position.



Table-side service enhances the guests' dining experience at the 21 Club in New York City
Courtesy of the 21 Club

You've certainly been patient. We appreciate your taking time to tell us about this.

Keep responses simple and sincere. Accept ownership for the problem, even though you personally may not be responsible.

When a guest orders "incorrectly," accept the responsibility. Avoid making the guest feel stupid. Tact is in order: "Perhaps next time you'd like to try a medium-done steak and be sure to let us know how it is."

One restaurant general manager puts customer relations in this framework: "Unless you are willing to give each customer a little bit of yourself, you shouldn't be in the hospitality field."

Servers' Viewpoint

Let the servers speak regarding restaurant customers and perhaps some curious information will surface.

The thing that bugs me the most is that some customers will eat almost all the food and then send a few crumbs back, complaining that it is inedible. I mean, sometimes they will send back a sandwich and only the bread will be left! Other customers will even count the number of noodles in a bowl of chicken soup and complain when the total isn't high enough—just as if we were violating a rule from the Bureau of Standards.

Older people are the worst offenders. They simply do not treat waitpersons like human beings. They have certain expectations about what a meal in a restaurant is supposed to be, and if they are not satisfied, they are mad and feel ripped off. They also talk to you as if you were a moron. “Get me water!” or “Where is the bathroom?” never “please” or “thank you.” The next worst to deal with are the families with small children. They demand the most service, make the biggest messes, and leave the worst tips.

My biggest gripe is people who say “Smile”—one server explained that she “got balled out” by a guest who had told her to smile. She replied, “You smile, sir—now hold that smile for eight hours, you sucker!”

Some servers complain about the large parties who, after the meal has been put on one check, insist that the waitress make out separate checks. Another gripe is when a group is asked if they want coffee, only one says yes. Then, one by one, the rest of the party orders it later on.

“I hate it,” say a number of servers, “when they snap their fingers to get my attention.”

Then there are the guests who treat servers as invisible, as subpersons or nonpersons. Some guests come in for criticism because somehow, if the server is attractive, the women in the party become competitive.

One restaurant owner claims, “When a person walks in here, they are psychologically sitting in a high chair. Their attitude is one of the screaming child: ‘Look at me first, notice me first, feed me first, and make me the most important person in the world.’”

Then there is the comforting guest who sees the perpetual smile on the server’s face and says, “You don’t have to do that to yourself. I know you have feelings, you don’t have to turn yourself into a Barbie doll.” The server’s retort, “I’d rather deal with a drunk than a shrink. They’re easier to handle.”

Difficult Guests

Once in a while, a server is confronted by a *difficult guest* who is determined to prove his manhood or vent hostility on other guests, on the serving personnel, or on the manager personally. A large coffee-shop chain encountering more than its share of such guests because its units are open around the clock insists on a “hands-in-the-pocket” policy, which means that no matter how obnoxious a patron becomes, a manager never considers being physical in handling the situation.

The majority of *handling complaints* falls into employees’ hands. Employees have to be trained to problem solve the right way and right away.

The approach is “What can I do to help?” which is, in itself, quite disarming. The fact that the manager has a pot of hot coffee in hand may also give the patron pause. It matters not how big the manager or whether male or female; the manager who speaks calmly and acts ready to mediate or settle a problem can usually calm the most disruptive person.

If the calm approach fails, the manager may have a system of hand signals for employees, one of which means “call the police.” Suggesting that the police are on the way (even though that may not be the case) is also effective in emergency situations. If a problem customer is completely unreasonable, the best thing to do is insist that he or she leave. Any food served is on the house.

Bar operators say that an effective approach to anyone drinking excessively is to say “If you leave, I’ll pay for all of your drinks.” If the patron is too inebriated to drive, it is often wise to insist on putting the person in a cab and, if necessary, paying the cab fare. The so-called third-party liability feature of the law can place the restaurant at fault for serving too much alcohol. Should the person become involved in an auto accident, the restaurant operator can be sued and, in some cases, held liable for damages, sometimes involving hundreds of thousands of dollars.

If it is necessary to get rid of a problem guest, call the police if you are unable to resolve the problem any other way—or if violence occurs.

STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS

No restaurant likes to hear guest complaints. According to Kay McCleery, director of training for Hobe’s Franchising Corporation, a win/win result can be obtained by using these action tips:

- Act immediately on a complaint.
- Let the guest know you care.
- Calm the guest by acknowledging the problem and encouraging feedback.
- Tell the guest in an honest way how the problem will be addressed.
- Invite the guest to express his or her feelings.
- Never invalidate or make the guest wrong.
- Offer appropriate and reasonable amends.
- Nurture the relationship by smiling and thanking the guest again.⁷

Other strategies can also make the situation better. Although there are no specific steps to follow, operators and staff members can do the following to make irate patrons feel better. These responses are critical to regaining diners’ loyalty and encouraging repeat business.

- *Be diplomatic:* The issue is not whether the guest is justified in his or her complaint—as long as diners feel justified, they are. A helpful initial response from you and your staff can go a long way toward salvaging the situation.
- *Remain calm:* Although you may feel that you are being personally attacked by the patron, try to remember that the person is mad at the situation and not at you. You must put your personal feelings aside and handle the situation in a professional, calm manner. Arguing with an already annoyed guest is a no-win situation.

- *Listen:* When guests become angry, they have to vent that anger in order to feel better. Listen to everything they have to say without interrupting. Just feeling that they are being heard can help ease their anger.
- *Empathize:* The best response you can make when handling complaints is to show empathy. Empathy is the ability to feel as another person feels. Your objective is to identify with the diner's feelings and to let him or her know that you understand. Whatever you do, don't offer excuses for the problem or complaint.
You can show empathy by rephrasing both the contents of the problem and the guest's feelings about it. For example, you might say, "I realize that you are upset about your steak being undercooked, and I understand that it makes you feel angry." Be sure to tell the diner that you are sorry the incident occurred and that his or her feelings are important to the restaurant. Also tell the person that you will take care of the problem immediately.
- *Control your voice:* The volume, speed, and tone of your voice can help defuse difficult situations. Your volume should never go up—even if the diner's does. Speaking in a calm, slow voice will show the diner that you are really concerned about the problem and are prepared to solve it. Sometimes speaking more and more softly helps, too.
- *Get the facts:* Some incidents, such as a lost coat or a charge-card error, may be difficult to resolve. Collect as much data as you can and write it all down. Writing down the details shows the guest that you take the incident seriously and will also help you remember pertinent information.
- *Take care of the problem immediately:* Whether it is an entrée that is not prepared properly or dirty glassware, remove the offending object from the table immediately. If you are unsure what response the diner wants, ask, for example, "Would you like me to take that and bring you the menu?" (or "another glass?").
- *If you do take back a diner's entrée, offer to keep the meals of the other diners in the party warm in the kitchen so that the group can eat together:* An irate diner may become more so if he or she has to sit there and watch others enjoy their food while waiting for a replacement entrée.⁸

TEEN CONFRONTATIONS

Fast-food restaurants catering to the younger crowd can easily become hangouts and the scene of altercations of one kind or another. Ground rules must be laid down, and, in some cases, a security person must be employed to maintain order. These guidelines for preventing volatile situations have been found effective:

- Employ an experienced host who quickly identifies the few troublemakers in a crowd and refuses them service. If a troublemaker insists on remaining in the restaurant, the police are called at once.
- When the troublemakers are enrolled in nearby schools, the host or manager works with school administrators to discipline them. For example, young

students who have squirted ketchup on walls are required by the principal to clean it up, and the school administration enforces a rule requiring them to avoid the restaurant.

- A host on the scene can readily identify incipient trouble and do what is necessary to avoid it. Students have been known to throw hamburgers at the serving personnel in a hamburger restaurant, spew condiments on the floor and the walls, fight among themselves, and use loud profanity, all of which must be curbed at once if the problem is not to get out of hand.

Service Personnel as a Family

Many managers do whatever possible to create a family feeling among foodservice personnel. They encourage employees to eat and drink on the premises by reducing their price for meals and drinks by a third or even half. Employee parties are sponsored; liquor and sometimes food is provided. (Other operators do not permit their employees to come back even if off duty.)

The serving group, in many ways, is the elite within the restaurant, having the fun of working with guests. In many restaurants, servers are selected, in large part, on the basis of appearance—the best-looking women and the handsomest men.

Greeter or Traffic Cop

The greeter in the restaurant is supposed to be just that—a host welcoming the arriving guest, saying a few kind words, and really being pleased to have the person pay the restaurant a visit. As the first representative of the restaurant to interact with the visitor, the host sets the tone for the entire dining experience. His or her welcome, or lack of it, creates a feeling, positive or negative, that colors the entire meal experience.

It has been observed that the rookie who, for the first few weeks of being a host in a busy restaurant, is an outgoing, warm, friendly human being, can easily turn into a traffic cop who orders visitors, “Leave your name and we’ll call you,” or “Sit over there until a table opens up.” It is quite understandable that, with fatigue, the big hello can become a little hello, or less. It is difficult to smile and act friendly when the individual feels anything but friendly or ready to cope with new problems.

It does not take new hosts long to realize that their pay may be a fraction of that of the servers, yet they may be working just as hard and may be contributing as much or more to the dining experience. With a few exceptions, hosts receive close to minimum wage, while servers may earn three times that amount. Little wonder that hosts lose some zest for doing an outstanding job. One solution is to give hosts the option of becoming servers as the next vacancy occurs.

Restaurant Service Quality

Guest satisfaction levels with restaurant service quality hinge on several key service encounters.

The key areas are:

- Booking the table (when applicable).
- Ease of access.
- Parking (possibly valet).
- The welcome greeting.
- The host/hostess encounter.
- The table's ready (not ready).
- The host/hostess seats guests and presents menus.
- The server introduces him- or herself and takes the beverage order.
- The server explains the "specials" followed by taking the order.
- Serve the appetizers.
- Clear the appetizers and check to replenish the beverages.
- Serve the entrées.
- Clear the entrées.
- Suggestively sell the desserts.
- Clear desserts and offer coffee and after-dinner drinks.
- Bring check when requested.

Each of these items can be given points and scored to arrive at a level of satisfaction for the service at a restaurant.

FIGURE 13.1: Readers tell how restaurants fare

Tact: Always

How many times have you entered a restaurant to be greeted with the words "How many?" or by some comment such as "The waiting time is 30 minutes," or "Please have a seat at the bar."

Don't say "Just one?" or "Are you alone?" When tables are plentiful, the question could be "Would you prefer a table or a booth?"

How much better to look the guest full in the face, smile, and say, "May I help you with your coat?" Guests want common courtesy, which means recognition, respect, and a friendly welcome. We all know that a principal reason people dine out is the desire for sociability. Failing to meet this basic need is an unnecessary form of deprivation foisted on guests by an unthinking service person who has mixed up his or her priorities. Figure 13.1 shows the key service areas for a restaurant.

Summary

Guest relations is one of the aspects of restaurant keeping that makes it so interesting—and so frustrating. It is a continuous challenge, a challenge that is not for the timid, the tired, or the malcontent. The perfectionist and the thin-skinned cannot win at the customer relations game—there are too many variables.

A sense of humor, good health, and a lively intelligence are decided assets. A desire to please and to serve is even more valuable.

Key Terms and Concepts

Difficult guest	Service encounter
Eye contact	Social distance
Formality or informality	Tact
Handling complaints	Team
Hard sell/soft sell	

Review Questions

1. Service personnel must be aware of the degree of social distance desired by their customers. Explain.
2. As a restaurant manager, your attention is called by a server to a booth of four men who are talking loudly, using profanity, and appear to be belligerent. How would you handle the situation?
3. Your restaurant is located near a high school. Recently, several of the students who are patrons have been throwing ice and wadded paper napkins at each other. What should you do?
4. Eye contact is particularly important in patron relations. Explain.
5. In seating a lone woman in a restaurant, what factors should be considered?
6. The degree of psychological tension that is desirable varies with the situation. How can a restaurant manager work to raise or lower the tension to make it appropriate for the situation?
7. What are three phrases suitable for use by a hostess in greeting patrons? What are three phrases for saying good-bye to them?
8. In taking reservations, what factors help determine how much time to allow between seatings?
9. Can you, in your mind, make a table setting for a dinner guest, mentally placing plate, cup and saucer, silverware, and glassware?
10. Have you decided to take lunch or dinner reservations? What are the pros and cons? Would you take them on Friday and Saturday evenings, your busiest nights?
11. What will be your policy in handling guest complaints about the food (the steak is too tough, my soup is cold)?

Internet Exercise

Surf the Web for sites that have interesting information on restaurant service and customer relations. Share your findings with your class.

Endnotes

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