

### The New "Word of Mouth": Customer Review Web Sites

For the longest time, a "word of mouth" reputation meant just that: opinions about a restaurant's food or service spread from one person to another—in person! But the Internet has quickly changed all of that. With the ever-increasing number of Web sites dedicated to posting customer feedback, word of mouth can spread just as easily around the country as it can around a county. This poses both possibilities and risks for restaurant and foodservice establishments.

On the downside, any irate customer can post a negative review to a Web site for thousands of people to access and read with the click of a button. This means any mistake an operation makes, any bad night that an operation has, can come back to haunt it on the Web for years to come. There's definitely less room for error in a world where instant feedback has become the norm.

Web sites like TripAdvisor specialize in collecting customer feedback on restaurants around the world, but information on a local restaurant can just as easily be found in Google Maps where thousands of people submit their opinions about everything from restaurant décor to food to customer service. The iPhone offers the popular Urbanspoon application that allows customers to not only rate and give feedback, but encourages guests to take pictures of menus and food. The number of Web sites that offer such review forums is only increasing.

On the upside, operations can use all of this feedback constructively. They can examine the positive things customers are saying and try to capitalize on those elements, and they can also look to improve on the negative things people are saying. And the best part? Any operation can access and use this feedback without paying a penny. For better or worse, it's all totally free!

## *Resolving Customer Complaints*

There will inevitably be occasions when things go wrong and a guest is not happy. Any unhappy customer is bad for business, so every operation needs an organized system for handling and resolving all guest complaints.

The person who first receives the complaint is responsible for making sure it gets resolved, even if that means deferring to someone else, such as a manager, to do so. Some operations choose the on-duty manager or shift supervisor to resolve complaints. Other operations allow employees to solve the problem without supervision. It is important that managers support employees' decisions when they authorize them to resolve complaints. This develops the trust necessary to have empowered employees. However an operation chooses to resolve customer complaints, management must train every staff member on how to handle these situations.

Handle guests' complaints in proven ways. These methods help to effectively resolve problems:

- Listen to the guest attentively, always looking for ways to solve the problem.
- Treat the guest with courtesy and respect.
- Don't become defensive. Don't take guests' complaints personally.
- Be patient.
- Empathize with the guest.
- Paraphrase the problem to confirm it with the guest. In other words, restate the problem and main details.
- Take responsibility for the situation as a manager or employee. Don't hide behind a job description. Never brush off a guest by saying, "Sorry, that's not my job."
- Don't pass the buck or blame other employees. Take ownership for resolving complaints unless the situation necessarily calls for additional help or authority, such as a supervisor or manager.

[fast fact]

#### Did You Know...?

Many restaurants conduct regular staff training exercises to ensure that everyone understands policies, procedures, and menu items. Some facilities take this a step further, using scheduled or random quizzes to test employee knowledge. These can be oral or written tests. Other establishments use role-playing activities to demonstrate proper server-customer interaction. All of these activities help to maintain a consistently high level of quality customer service, no matter which servers are working during a particular shift.

When are tests a good idea?

- When management changes the menu or beverage list
- When staff members need a refresher on management policies
- When customers complain
- When management hires a number of new employees
- When management implements new policies or procedures
- When servers need a refresher on suggestive selling methods

Testing can and should be used as a vital tool to maintain and improve business operations. Be sure to frame it in that light for staff, rather than as a way to "catch" employees.

It is important to recognize when a guest is upset so that the problem can quickly be resolved. Some problems are easy to recognize, especially when a customer is visibly upset. However, most problems are more difficult to recognize because the large majority of customers simply go away unhappy.

Customers need to be asked whether everything was enjoyable. Rather than only asking, "Was everything OK?," ask "Did you enjoy the red snapper?" Actively look to see whether the guest is demonstrating signs of being unhappy with the service or meal, and then encourage the guest to explain the problem. Some of the more subtle signs of an irritated guest include looking annoyed, not finishing a meal, avoiding eye contact, or saying unconvincingly that everything was just "OK." Be aware of these signs and be ready to help solve any problems. In short, never ignore or avoid a dissatisfied guest. Problems occur and mistakes are made; customers understand this. Proactively addressing such occurrences with customers can turn a dissatisfied customer into a repeat guest.

[on the job]

### **Mirror, Mirror... Responding to Customer Complaints**

Far too often, conflicts get out of control because people don't listen to each other, or don't act like they're listening to each other. A method of conflict resolution that tries to fix this common problem is mirroring, or paraphrasing language.

Mirroring language is very simple to do and helps clarify points of view when people are frustrated or angry. People mirror language when they simply repeat back what someone else has said before carrying on with their own thoughts or ideas. For example, if a customer is irate because they've waited over an hour for their entrée to come, first listen attentively to all they have to say and then begin a response by first repeating back what they said. For instance, "I understand that you've been waiting for over an hour, and that your kids are starving, and you feel your server has been avoiding you. I apologize for this, and I want to try to fix this situation for you."

By repeating back, or mirroring, all the grievances of the guest, the manager demonstrates two crucial things: 1) attentive listening and 2) empathy. This diminishes any chance for continued misunderstanding or miscommunication. If the manager simply starts by saying, "I apologize" without clearly stating they are apologizing for, the guest might not think that they are really listening.

Mirroring, then, is a simple tool to diffuse a potentially explosive situation. After all, often all a disgruntled guest wants is to be heard, and mirroring can resolve that issue simply by doing it.

Notify managers of all guest complaints. This helps the whole operation to take corrective action so the problem won't happen again. Customers appreciate it when managers apologize and show concern. In extreme cases, a follow-up written note of apology is appropriate.

When receiving complaints from guests over the phone, a manager or host may be trying to understand a situation in which they were not personally involved. Follow the same steps for resolving the complaint as if talking to the guest in person. Remember, the caller is probably not angry at the person to whom they are speaking, but at the situation.

It's a good idea to take notes when hearing a guest's complaint over the phone. The manager needs all the facts to work out a solution or pass along the information. Follow up on details that are unclear. This lets the caller know that someone is really listening to the complaint. Apologize for the problem so the caller knows they are understood. If the caller needs to be referred to someone else, be sure to give the customer the name of the person who will be handling the complaint. Most important, be sure the person who is responsible for dealing with the customer receives the message.

Managers also handle written letters and email complaints. Handling a customer complaint in writing requires additional care. Whenever an employee or manager is resolving a complaint, they should never accept responsibility (either verbal or written) for a customer's injury or damage to property unless a proper investigation and insurance inquiry has occurred. They should also never document any standard policy for reimbursing customers in writing. Each company has its own guidelines for how to respond to these situations, and most organizations want the flexibility to resolve complaints on a case-by-case basis. For more information, please see *Chapter 7: Communication*.

**[on the job]**

**Responding to Customer Complaints**

More than anything else, guests with complaints want to be heard. Take advantage of this important feedback from customers. It may be uncomfortable at the time, but use the information to improve the establishment's level of service. Moreover, if an unhappy guest feels that he or she is being ignored, it will make the situation worse. This will likely result in losing any future business from the customer.

Many customers will not complain in person; instead, they may simply never return to the establishment. So when a customer takes the time to present a complaint, treat both the person and the complaint with respect. Be sympathetic and take responsibility for problems that have occurred. When possible, offer a remedy that is consistent with the concern. Each situation is different.

For instance, a 30-minute delay between the clearing of the salads and the arrival of the entrées might infuriate a guest. An appropriate solution might be to offer a free dessert along with a sincere apology. But don't go overboard; an inappropriate solution might be to comp the entire meal. Sometimes the solution is simply allowing the guest to feel that someone else really understands the problem.

## Summary

In this section, you learned the following:

- Reservations should include the following information:
  - Customer's name
  - Customer's contact information
  - Date and time of arrival
  - Number of people in customer's party
  - Any special needs or requests the customer may have
- Greeters often present the first impression a guest will have of an establishment. They should be friendly, professional, and create a welcoming atmosphere for customers.
- Servers should be attentive and friendly when interacting with a table of guests. They should also be careful and organized when taking and placing orders. All table check information should include the following:
  - Proper seat and table numbers, where appropriate
  - Proper order in delivery sequence
  - Accepted abbreviations of operation that all staff can understand
  - Temperatures as needed, along with any special requests
- Suggestive selling involves recommending additional or different items to a customer. It is one of the keys to the success of any retail business. In a restaurant, maximize guest satisfaction and increase the average check with suggestive selling, resulting in more profits.
- All managers and staff must understand the effects of alcohol and become familiar with any and all laws that apply to their establishments. Every state has its own liquor laws and oversees the sale and service of alcohol within its borders. Laws vary considerably from state to state. Many counties and towns have their own, often stricter, liquor laws. Sellers or servers of alcohol may face criminal charges for the following actions: serving alcohol to a minor; serving a guest who is or appears to be intoxicated; or possessing, selling, or allowing the sale of drugs on the premises.
- Customer payment is usually processed with cash or credit. Accepting payment graciously and processing it efficiently is just as important to customer service as any other service task. When processing payment tableside, the following procedure is used:

- Present the check at the table.
- Collect payment from the customers.
- Process payment.
- Return change or credit card receipt and credit card.
- All staff must be sure to thank guests for their patronage when payment is processed.
- Customer feedback is important in keeping an operation running efficiently and profitably. Routinely ask whether the food, drink, service, and accommodations (seating, temperature, lighting, and so on) are satisfactory during a customer's visit. Additional ways to determine customer satisfaction include the following:
  - Encouraging customers to complete comment cards at end of visit
  - Assessing customer satisfaction through surveys after visit
  - Holding focus groups with both customers and employees to get detailed feedback
  - Starting a mystery-shopper program
- Resolving a customer complaint effectively can be the difference between gaining a repeat customer and gaining a bad reputation. The ways to effectively address customer complaints include the following:
  - Listen to the guest attentively.
  - Treat the guest with courtesy and respect.
  - Don't become defensive.
  - Don't take customers' complaints personally.
  - Be patient.
  - Empathize with the guest.
  - Paraphrase the problem to confirm it with the guest.
  - Take responsibility for the situation as a manager or employee.

## Section 10.2 Review Questions

- 1 List three bits of information that should be included in any reservation.
- 2 What are three ways in which an employee can effectively execute suggestive selling?
- 3 What is a dram shop law? Explain how it could affect the server of a restaurant.
- 4 List three ways in which an operation can collect customer feedback.
- 5 How can you make guests feel special and still pursue suggestive selling? Provide two examples.
- 6 Linda and Chef Jean have been running a new customer service program for six months. It seems like business is starting to pick up again, but they're not getting the response they had hoped for. They need to get customer feedback to identify what's working with the new program and what isn't. What would be the best method to gather feedback and why?
- 7 After an expensive meal, a guest hands you a credit card. It seems that the name you heard his friends calling him is different than the name on the card. Explain how you would handle this situation using the information you have learned in this chapter.
- 8 Given the importance of checking identification when providing alcohol service, what program would you implement for your staff to follow? Start with the request for alcohol from the three different people listed here. What would you do?
  - a. A 15-year-old boy
  - b. A 25-year-old woman
  - c. A 35-year-old man

## Section 10.2 Activities

### 1. Study Skills/Group Activity: The Service is the Thing!

Working with two or three other students, develop a skit demonstrating proper customer service, beginning with the customer's entrance and concluding with his departure. Perform your skit for the class.

### 2. Independent Activity: Sell! Sell! Sell!

You're the owner of a restaurant that is struggling to make money. You know that your service staff lack experience and need to improve their skills. You decide that you need to start a more aggressive suggestive selling training program with them. Knowing their limitations, you want to focus on a few basic points. What three suggestive selling points would you focus on with your staff and why?

### 3. Critical Thinking: Happy Anniversary?

Two guests of your restaurant had an unfortunate experience. The reservation they made for an anniversary dinner was lost, as were the special instructions they had included about their dessert. It was a busy night, so it took nearly an hour to seat the couple, and it was not possible to prepare the desired dessert. Obviously, they are very unhappy. As the manager on duty, how do you handle their complaint? What can you do to resolve the situation?