



The Art of Service

Service is one staple every foodservice operator must keep in stock.

by Cheryl Ursin

Johnny Chin knows exactly what his customers want. "They want their hot food hot, their cold food cold; they want to get value for their money; and they want to get it fast," says Chin, team leader of merchandising and food and beverage operations for several California airport units run by Host Marriott Services.

Sounds simple enough. But, like most restaurant operators, Chin knows that giving customers what they want is often easier said than done. In fact, Chin, who manages 26 food-and beverage airport outlets, knows exactly how difficult it can be. He has just devoted a year to training his staff as part of AirFair, Bethesda, Maryland-based Host Marriott's new strategy to give customers fair prices, quality products and good service, which the company inaugurated at

one of his operations. "You can't just put up a banner and expect customers to trip over themselves coming in your door," he says. "AirFair isn't just a program. It's a whole mindset change."

Serving service-savvy customers

The best service is often the least noticeable: An empty plate disappears, but the customer never sees anyone clear it; a wine glass or coffee cup is refilled without a request, almost as if by magic. Yet, although service is supposed to be virtually subliminal, customers think and talk-about it a great deal.

Restaurant operators are aware of those service concerns and know that their customers will vote with their dollars to get the quality service they crave. In a 1994 survey conducted by the National

Restaurant Association, for example, 25 percent of the operators surveyed said that service was the most important factor of the dining experience for their customers more important even than the quality of the food.

Many operators think their service is the reason for their success. "Service is of critical importance to a small, independent restaurant like ours," says Miriam Juban, one of the owners of Juban's, a 145-seat restaurant in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

"Forty-six restaurants, most of them chains, have opened in our area in the last two years. Giving good service is what we can do to compete."

Chains, quickservice and fullservice alike, also find service to be the key to keeping ahead of the competition. "Guests have a pretty good idea of what type of food they are going to get at a casual-theme restaurant," says Roger Ahlfeld, manager of training for Uno Restaurant Corporation, headquartered in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. "Service – attending to the individual guest's needs – is the real point of differentiation for us."

Personality and procedure

Good service, though seemingly simple to describe, is a very elusive thing to manage. It usually comes down to a personal interaction between the server and the customer. How can a restaurant operator control that?

Still, personality alone does not translate into good service. "A restaurateur once told me that he'd hire happy people and then they would do the right thing," says Robert Welcher, president of Restaurant Consultant, Inc., in Columbus, Ohio. "It blew me away." Welcher, who has a degree in educational psychology and once ran three restaurants of his own, does believe in hiring for personality, but then, he says, the server must be given enough knowledge and support to do the job right. Servers should be provided with a procedure for every detail of serving their customers, from placing the napkins on the table so the logo faces the guests to scripting for service procedures, from saying hello to goodbye.

"When people have things to say, they are more comfortable," he says.

Welcher warns, however, that coming up with the procedures is just the beginning; they then have to be put into practice and monitored. "You can set all the criteria you want," he says, "and some companies have written great manuals, but when you run your finger over the top of their books, they're dusty."

When Welcher works with his restaurant clients, he backs up the initial training with periodic visits from mystery shoppers – people from his company that pose as regular customers and evaluate the service they receive. "And there's no mystery about it," he says "The servers know they are going to be evaluated, and that they are going to get their reviews back. Our clients spend a lot of time going over their reports with the service staff." Welcher mystery shopping reports pass on both positive and negative feedback. "A lot of times, restaurant servers never see the reports from a mystery shopper unless they do poorly," he explains.

Restaurant Consultant's mystery shopping is used as an ongoing training tool to continually monitor the restaurant's facility, service personnel and food products. Manager's use the detailed reviews in associate coaching sessions to improve service and selling performance. The reviews are also used as a basis for an incentive/reward system to provide recognition and motivate service associates.

Complex problem, simple solution?

Through their dedication to some relatively simple strategies, Chin and other service-conscious operators have found that making a commitment to improve customer service can pay off in repeat business and increased employee loyalty.

Cheryl Ursin writes for Restaurants USA from New York City

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The mystery shopping service and comment card system are designed to continually monitor customer service performance and to act as an on-going training tool. The scored shopping reports are also used as a basis for an incentive/reward program to motivate the service staff. For more information call (800) 859-7203.

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