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Stewards of Better Beer

"Tria has an equal emphasis on beer and wine, so we have both a 'wine guy' and a 'beer guy' who do the lists, ordering, and training. However, **everyone is the beer sommelier and the wine sommelier – we want our servers and bartenders to be conversant.** We conduct classes for both staff and the public at our off-site Fermentation School. Education is our point of differentiation."

—JON MYEROW, OWNER, TRIA,
PHILADELPHIA, PA

"As the beer steward, my tasks are similar to those of a sommelier. I guide the selection, work the floor, etc. **A big part of my role is as an educator; I've been working with my colleagues for many years, tasting and discussing beer and beer with food.** I also wait tables, so I'm on the floor and called over constantly for guidance."

—WARREN STEENSON, BEER STEWARD,
HIGGINS RESTAURANT, PORTLAND, OR

"**As part of my beverage program responsibilities, I have full creative control over the beer list, plus I handle education and training.** I'm putting together a beer manual, which will include our philosophy, profiles of different breweries, etc. When we have a group of new hires, we sit down and work through the list – we talk about how to taste and we review different styles. I also taste servers on new beers and get feedback at family meals."

—KEVIN GARRY, ASST. BEVERAGE DIRECTOR,
GRAMERCY TAVERN, NEW YORK, NY



Briefing

americanexpress.com/restaurant



MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

Hospitality Means Saying You're Sorry

Companies – including restaurants – invest considerable resources in tools and training to help them understand and deliver exactly what their customers want. But despite all efforts, they sometimes fail – even if it is only in the eyes of the customer. This presents both challenges and opportunities. **Customers who voice complaints can help diagnose weaknesses in an operation; they also offer chances to build and strengthen relationships.**

A small percentage of unhappy customers actually voice complaints, but they often point out problems experienced by others. While complaints may be tough to hear, those who speak up want you to know what went wrong, trust you to make it right, and are willing to give you the chance. "If you operate on the premise that when a customer complains he's really doing you a favor, it's a lot easier for staff to deal with. Besides, many of our best customers started out in this category," says Alex Brennan-Martin, author, *The Simple Truth*, and co-owner, Brennan's of Houston, Houston, TX. Indeed, according to TARP Worldwide, a customer experience research/consulting firm, **as many as 95% of customers will revisit a restaurant if their problems are solved quickly and satisfactorily – and these customers are as, or more, loyal than those who never experienced a problem.** But how can service recoveries bond and solidify relationships?

"Guests who complain are usually willing to forgive and be happy again – which gives us something to work with."

— MARK CANLIS, OWNER, CANLIS RESTAURANT, SEATTLE, WA

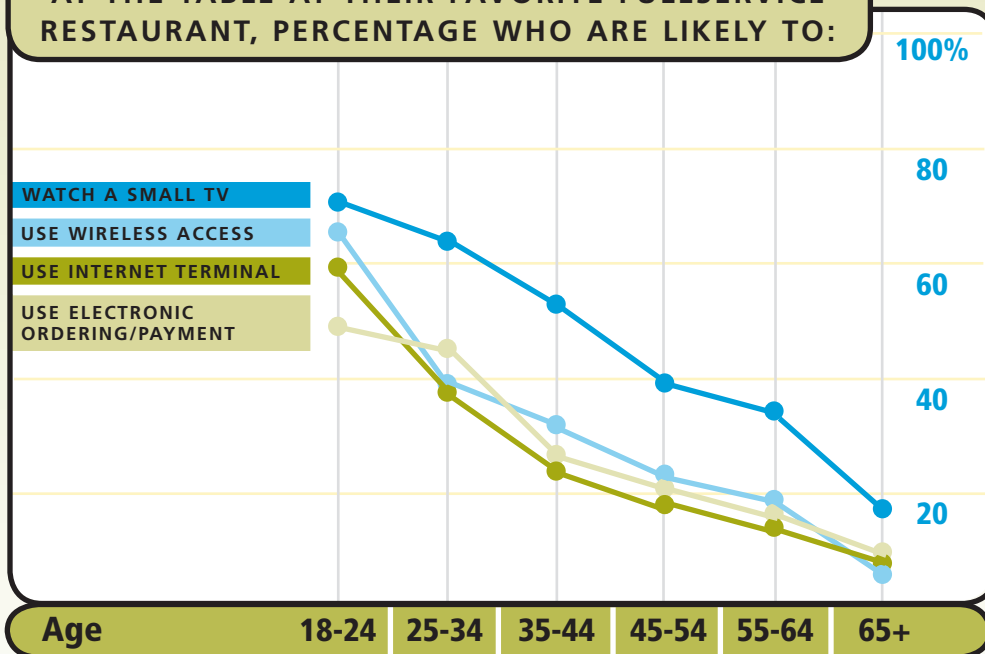
One of the findings of *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America*, prepared by Public Agenda, is that when people judge the quality of customer service, they zero in on the attentiveness, concern, and engagement they get. **"We've found that when you acknowledge a mistake and genuinely express regret, guests will almost always give you a chance to earn back their favor,"** says Danny Meyer, author, *Setting the Table*, and ceo, Union Square Hospitality Group, New York, NY. The apology is key – minus the alibi. "It's not appropriate to make excuses – just say that you're sorry this happened and act," he says. Mark Canlis, owner, Canlis restaurant, Seattle, WA, agrees. "Guests want to hear that a mistake was made, how you feel about it, and that you're dealing with it." At Brennan's of Houston, this might involve looking a guest in the eye and acknowledging, "We goofed." A Canlis mea culpa might include, "We want to turn this around."

Union Square Hospitality Group restaurants operate on the principle that true hospitality exists when the person on the receiving end feels you are on his side – a very powerful message. Recent data from Yankelovich, Inc. underscores ways this can be communicated. Around half of consumers surveyed said that when a company is quick to own up to mistakes and/or frankly admits shortcomings, it has an extremely or very positive influence on their feelings about the company having customers' best interests in mind. **But the Aggravating Circumstances report also cautions that good will is negated – and companies might even pay a price – if their customers suspect they are going through the motions of being courteous or are feigning concern.** Consumers today long for civility and respect, but to truly win their loyalty, the concern has to be sincere.



High Tech, Low Touch?

AT THE TABLE AT THEIR FAVORITE FULLSERVICE RESTAURANT, PERCENTAGE WHO ARE LIKELY TO:



Source: National Restaurant Association.

National Restaurant Association (NRA) research suggests that younger adults' ease with technology may be shaping their attitudes about its role in the restaurant experience. Not only do younger adults research restaurants, make reservations, and place orders online more than older adults – those aged 18-24 would be dramatically more likely to watch a small TV, access the Internet wirelessly, and use customer-activated ordering/payment terminals at the table in fullservice restaurants.

“Restaurants have gone from being America’s dining room to America’s family room,” says Hudson Riehle, sr. vp, Research and Information Services, NRA. “Younger customers want some of the entertainment options traditionally associated with that.” This is not to say that every fullservice restaurant should place TV monitors on the table, cautions Hudson, but they should think ahead. “This will always be a service business, but the young have entirely different expectations about how to use restaurants. The trend towards technology as an expected part of the restaurant experience won’t reverse as these consumers mature and increase their spending power and younger generations come along.”



Price-Based Promotions Mean Business

Around the USA restaurateurs are using priced-based promotions to lure customers.

To bring people into the bar, 40 Sardines, **Overland Park, KS**, runs promotions most weeknights, repeating them each week. Monday is Service Industry Night (three courses for \$30), Wednesday is Panini & Martini Night (a panini and a 40 Sardini Martini for \$7 from 5–10pm), Thursday is BYOW (corkage fees are waived), and Friday features half-priced appetizers at the bar from 5–7pm. “We can’t do happy hours because of Kansas law, so we have to be creative,” says Debbie Gold, chef/owner. “Each night attracts a different crowd and business is definitely up”. . . .The nightly promotion at Fresco, **Madison, WI**, is called ‘The Fresco Fives.’ Weekdays from 8–9pm and weekends from 9–10pm, customers are offered select martinis, wines by the glass, and small plates for \$5, plus \$5 off all entrees and desserts.

“We’re in a college town and have a pretty high average check, so this promotion encourages students to try us,” explains Brianna Pintens, dining room manager. “Business is up 50% during these hours and students often come back with their parents”. . . .Wednesday nights at Rosemary’s, **Las Vegas, NV**, ladies get 50% off food and happy hour pricing on drinks and glass wines all night in the lounge. “When we began four years ago business jumped 50%; it’s still so successful that we’re booked a week out,” says Donna Freeman, pr director. There are restrictions, including an 18% tip that is added to the pre-discounted check. . . .Employees of nearby Jefferson Hospital who show their work I.D. receive a 20% discount on the food portion of their checks all the time at Portofino, **Philadelphia, PA**. “Close to 90% of our lunch business comes from hospital workers and many come in for dinner, too,” says Boris Radivojevici, manager.



“People love knowing what promotions are happening on which nights. This way they can plan and get a group together.”

– DEBBIE GOLD, CHEF/OWNER, 40 SARDINES, OVERLAND PARK, KS



The Need to Know

There is increasing awareness and concern among consumers about how and where their food is grown and produced. **“Our customers are becoming very in tune to what is on their plates,”** says Major White, owner, Savannah’s, Wrightsville Beach, NC. “The most frequent questions we get are about seafood – customers want to know when, where, and how it was caught. To respond, we teach our staff specifics about the food we serve – from the origin of the fish to what our chickens are fed and the humane conditions in which they are raised. This way the staff can accurately answer customers’ questions.”

“It’s not enough for us to serve great tasting food. We want to understand how the animals are raised, the vegetables grown, and where the spices come from.”

– CHRIS ARNOLD, PUBLIC RELATIONS DIRECTOR, CHIPOTLE

Steve LaHaie, vp, Shaw’s Crab House, Chicago and Schaumburg, IL, has found that working closely with seafood conservancies is an effective way to keep up with all the information he needs to know and wants to share with staff. **“You used to be able to just order salmon; now it’s important to know if it is wild or farmed, where it comes from, what it has been fed, and how it was raised,”** Steve says. “A couple of times a month, I’m on conference calls talking about sustainability issues and fishing regulations – there’s so much to know.” Steve says Seafood Choices Alliances (seafoodchoices.com) provides a list of seafood that is “environmentally sustainable” (those not being over-fished) as well as a sourcing guide. Other resources include the Marine Stewardship Council (msc.org), which has begun to certify fisheries around the world and provides a list on its Web site; the Sustainable Seafood Forum (aquariumofpacific.org); and Chicago’s Shed Aquarium. (Steve adds that most aquariums have sustainable seafood programs.)

For Chris Arnold, public relations director, Chipotle, “There’s no better way to learn than from the source. We are constantly visiting growers and producers around the country to ensure that the food we buy is grown under healthy, environmentally sound, and humane conditions – supporting our mission to serve ‘Food With Integrity.’”

Restaurants are also communicating their level of commitment more clearly. The Web site of Acme Chophouse, San Francisco, CA, has an entire section devoted to “Paths to Sustainability” that includes articles, resources, and information about food safety. On its Web site, Chipotle has a timeline showing what the company has been doing to become more sustainable and a frequently updated chart showing state-by-state where naturally grown pork, chicken, and beef is available in the restaurants. And on premise, names of some of the producers appear on the menu board, and stories about farmers are on drink cups. Savannah’s menu also lists some of their producers. “It’s a way to let customers know we’ve done our homework and that we’re proud enough of our relationship with that farm or producer to put it on our menu,” explains Major.



GREAT IDEA

Artworks in Residence

Since opening Bis on Main, Bellevue, WA, nine years ago, owner Joe Vilardi has created a distinctive environment featuring works by modern Northwest artists, primarily from the Seattle Art Museum’s rental program. “We get paintings for a three-month period, after which we have the option to renew, return, or buy.” (With 12 months to pay, interest

free.) Joe now owns over half the art and has helped the sale of many other works by referring customers to the museum. A recent remodel provided more space for the rotating inventory, which also includes pieces obtained directly from local artists, creating a gallery of sorts. “We don’t have flowers on the tables; we have beautiful art on the walls,” says Joe.

Getting E-mails Opened

Even though recipients have opted in to your e-mail list; they know the name of your company; and they are expecting to hear from you – there is no guarantee that they will receive, open, and act on your e-mails. The “from” and “subject” lines are key to getting them past the first critical points.

Use your brand to become a trusted sender. “Even with subscription-based e-mails, people don’t open them if they don’t recognize you,” says Gail Goodman, ceo, Constant Contact. “Use a consistent e-mail address in the ‘from’ line with your company name in the prefix before the ‘@’ or the domain name – and keep the line short so that the complete address appears.” Incorporating your brand in the subject line can also boost recognition.

Make every word count. “The typical subject line window has room for only five to eight words,” says Gail. She recommends making up for lack of space with solid words that offer value. “Think in terms of your audience and what few words will convey specific benefits,” she says. “The recipient will typically either open or delete your e-mail in three seconds or less. If there isn’t something about the subject line that lets them know why it’s worth their time to see what’s inside, then the choice will be clear.” Gail also stresses the importance of being straightforward and honest. (Use of misleading subject lines is against the law.) She advises people to revisit their subject lines after writing the message, both to make sure they are in sync and that the most compelling aspect is highlighted.

Write subject lines that don’t trigger spam filters. Unless your subject line is a question, avoid punctuations (especially exclamation points), symbols such as multiple \$\$, and all caps – all of which increase the chances of e-mails being filtered. Other red flags include “Re:” (as if to reply to a previous e-mail) and addressing recipients by name. “The more you can make each person feel that you are speaking directly to them, the more effective your communication will be,” says Gail. “But subject line personalization is a tactic that spammers have adopted – and it’s a waste of valuable space. Better to use the subject line for carefully chosen words that compel someone to open your e-mail and save the personalization for the message.”



Communal Tables Are Finding Their Place

Communal tables have been slow to gain acceptance, but they are increasingly appearing in restaurants of all types – from casual to fine dining. “We’re putting communal tables in almost all the restaurants we’re designing,” says Cass Calder Smith, principal, CCS Architecture. “Restaurants are becoming more casual and many people – particularly younger clientele – don’t like to make reservations or to commit until the last minute.” Cass explains that **communal tables work well for walk-ins, singles, and small groups – and the entire table can even be used for larger parties if there’s no private room.** “They offer terrific flexibility for both restaurants and customers, plus they give great energy to a room.”

“Communal tables are a natural extension of dining at the bar, which has become very popular in the last few years.”

– CASS CALDER SMITH, PRINCIPAL, CCS ARCHITECTURE

Usually situated between the bar and dining room and typically seating 10-14, most communal tables are bar height (42 inches). Cass recommends the width be 42 inches as well, so diners aren’t crowded. Instead of a separate high table, The Herbfarm, Woodinville, WA, combines modular dining tables to form “European Common” tables, seating six to nine. “Guests are told about the option of joining a common table when they make reservations,” says Carrie van Dyck, big cheese. “Some nights we have several – our modular system gives us ultimate flexibility.”

Most restaurants, like Hank’s Seafood, Charleston, SC, don’t take reservations for their communal table. “We turn it about three times a night, using it for last-minute reservations, singles, and walk-ins,” says Eric Rauber, gm. “Seating is up to the guests – it creates a casual and friendly atmosphere; people move over to accommodate other customers.” The community table at Terzo, San Francisco, CA, is what gm Matthew Derrick calls “nobody’s table and everybody’s table.” He says, “We found our young guests really understand it – they like sitting next to people they don’t know and striking up a conversation.” Monday is “Community Night” at The Kitchen Cafe, Boulder, CO. “Our communal table is doubled to seat 24 and a multiple-course tasting is served family style for \$35/person,” says Hugo Matheson, owner. **Recent referrals for Terzo’s communal table are coming from concierges sending business travelers, who increasingly don’t want to dine alone and want to be in a restaurant with a friendly, “neighborhood” vibe.** A caution: “If you have a communal table, you’ve got to commit to it and encourage people to sit there. Otherwise it ends up being a dead space,” advises Cass.



Hitting a Curve Ball

Trend: Today’s Consumers value mastering a moment, particularly when it involves the unexpected. Nearly 70% say it is extremely/very important that others see them as someone who takes things in stride; 47% give their skills at handling whatever life throws their way very high marks.

Opportunity: Restaurants that can respond to consumers’ curve balls – a table of four becoming six; an unexpected announcement of food allergies; last-minute reservations or late arrivals, etc. – will have a competitive advantage. Put contingencies in place – tables that are easily converted or combined, a real-time table inventory available online, bar seating for walk-ins, relationships with

nearby restaurants to manage overflow, etc., and ensure efficient communications throughout the front and back of the house. Providing a safety net for the unexpected extends off-premise – be the go-to resource for meals with great take-out systems, dishes available for last-minute gatherings, etc.

Caution: Make sure you are prepared for internal curve balls. Customer counts expand and contract, but so can staff, so consider cross-training people to step in and/or an on-call system. Above all, empower staff to think on their feet and reward resourcefulness in finding on-demand solutions.

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