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10 Rules for Amazing Customer Service in Your Restaurant

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To really succeed in the restaurant business, providing good food is only part of the battle. In order to win over customers and create a loyal following, you have to have amazing customer service.



Knowing what bad service is helps. But in truth, bad service rears its ugly head in many forms within a restaurant setting.

It could be an instance where a new set of customers are sat at a table. They wait patiently for a server to appear, and after what seems like an eternity, they are left wondering if they are, in fact, invisible. Or perhaps it's the group that was enjoying a wonderful conversation, only to be interrupted by a talkative server or bartender, or worse, rushed through the dining experience as if there is a short time limit on the available occupancy.

Who wants to pay for that? The bulk of your customers don't, and many will not return to a restaurant where they didn't feel valued.

So how do you set your food and beverage business up for hospitable success?

First, you have to find the right people to create that amazing experience for your customers.

Working With Your Employees

1. Hiring

The popular human resources mantra “hire for attitude and train for skill”ⁱ is often repeated for good reason. To find employees who truly exemplify the level of service that matches your restaurant’s goals, you need to employ those who are excited to do just that.

Begin with writing a job description. Consider all the tasks you will require your new employee to complete. Next consider the level of business you expect to attract and create a wish list of characteristics you are looking for in your employees.

To help with creating this list, consider asking yourself questions such as:

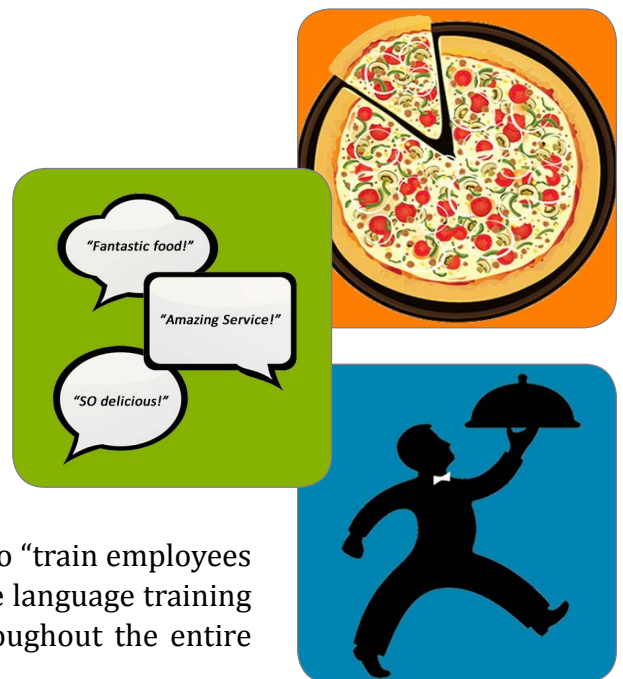
- Will your new employee be required to multi-task in a fast-paced setting? If so, look for candidates who have a lot of energy and are able to give focused answers to your interview questions.
- Does your restaurant provide fine dining? If yes, then look for individuals who are well-spoken, graceful and polite.
- Does the job candidate fit the atmosphere of my restaurant? Are they fun, laid back or sophisticated? Find the personalities that gel with the atmosphere you intend to provide your customers with.

The key is to interview for the personality traits and level of enthusiasm your business requires.

2. Training

Your employees animate your restaurant and it’s important to train them to do just that. In order to truly reach each employee while communicating the core values and expectations of your restaurant, each training session must begin with a mutual respect for your employee’s time and learning ability.

Consider engaging your staff through different styles of learning. A great example of creative training is found at The Hard Rock Café. This well-known restaurant chain uses training materials that are inspired by comic books – where it shows more pictures than words. Their training motto is to “train employees in the language in which they dream.” This includes multiple language training materials, using humor and keeping the staff engaged throughout the entire training process.ⁱⁱ



When communicating your training materials, work to ignite a level of excitement for the business while teaching your employees about the goals, values and expectations of the business.

3. Respect

Treat each of your team members with courtesy and respect. Be the example of how you want your employees to treat each other and your customers. In fact, how you treat your employees will directly translate into how they treat your customers.



A shining model of this philosophy lies within The Ritz-Carlton Hotel's employee motto, "We are ladies and gentleman serving ladies and gentlemen."ⁱⁱⁱ Essentially, this motto follows the golden rule of "treat others as you would have them treat you." Consider this when working through employee conflicts or misunderstandings. Allow your management style to remain transparent and consistent with everyone on staff. Your employees will mirror this level of respect in their service to all of your customers.

4. Communicate

The majority of disagreements, misunderstandings and bad tempers come from a lack of communication. When your employees know what is expected of their job performance, they are set up on a smoother road to success.

To communicate effectively to your staff, begin each shift with a daily lineup. This should be a standard operating procedure for both front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house staff.

- Start each lineup 10 to 20 minutes before the start of each shift. Use this time to explain the daily goals and specials.
- Review the appearance of your team and correct any visually unappealing issues, like a dirty apron, messy hair or a wrinkled shirt.

- Allow time for the chef to speak about the particulars of a special dish or to provide a taste for accurate tableside descriptions.
- Keep the flow of communication open and consistent with a scheduled time for explanation, praise, critique, questions and answers.

5. Value

An employee who feels valued works harder. It really is that simple. In order to ensure your customers are receiving the best service possible, it's important to value those who deliver it. Recognize excellence on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Provide and deliver on incentives and positive feedback to the employees who have consistently worked hard for your business.



Just as you personally regard the value and integrity of your restaurant; your employees have value for their own efforts and integrity.

Disrespect and empty promises will breed contempt. Retain good employees and follow through with promises, goals and standards from the top down. If management delivers on its promises to its employees, then the employees will deliver on their promises to the guests.^{iv}

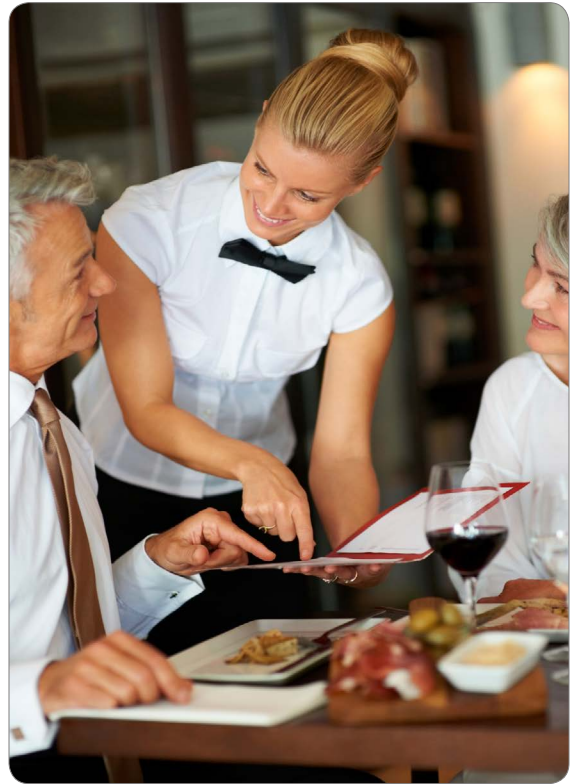
Working With Your Customers

6. Treatment

Everyone is a VIP in their own personal life. Give your customers the privilege of *really* feeling like they get the special treatment every time they come into your restaurant. Anticipate the needs of your guests and be ready for their next request before it is made.

Here are a few key elements of five-star service that you can implement in your bar or restaurant right now:

- Treat every single guest as if they are a secret shopper, restaurant critic or the boss's family.
- Keep section sizes small to ensure every table has your employee's full attention.
- Hire support staff to keep beverages refilled and tables clear of empty plates during your busiest hours of service.
- If reservations are accepted, ask if the party is celebrating a special occasion and prepare ahead of time to create a positively memorable event for the guest.



- Consider empowering each of your servers to create a solution for any error up to a certain dollar amount. In the case of a steak coming out over-cooked, allow the server to offer a free drink or free small dish to appease the guest who must now wait for another steak.
- Offer solutions for food allergies, dietary restrictions or personal preference. This doesn't mean re-inventing an entire dish for an individual, but accommodating particular guests will go a long way in word-of-mouth marketing.
- Remember every guest who has access to the Internet has the potential to be a critic. Give them good reason to rave about your restaurant.

7. Deliver

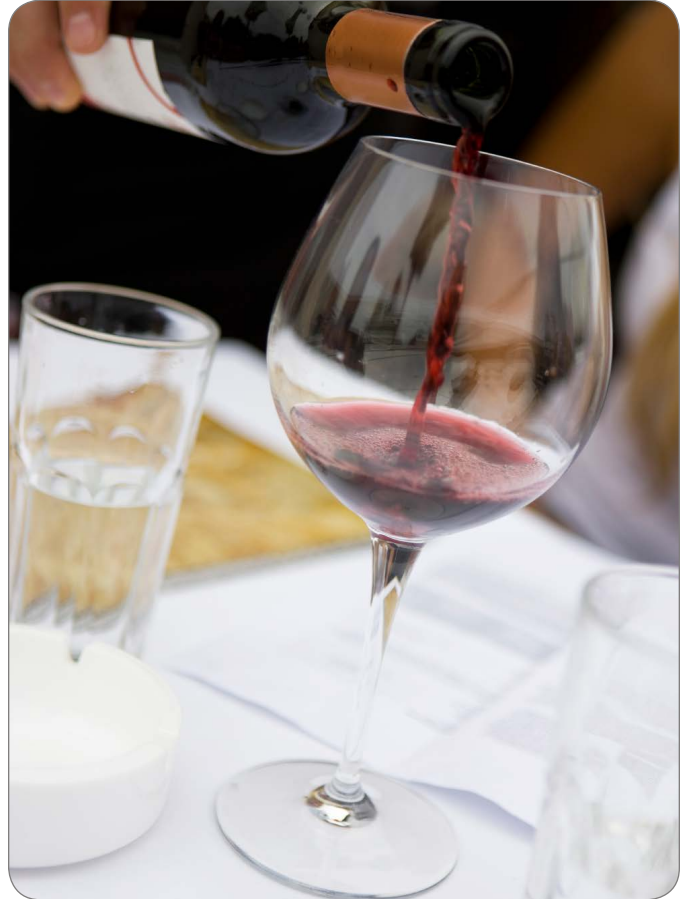
Different types of food and beverage businesses have different styles of service. Some have table service while others do not. Let's take a look at how you can deliver impeccable service for your business.

Mid-Range to Up-Scale Restaurants

If you charge more for a plate of pasta than the bargain restaurant down the street, demonstrate why.

- Create an ambiance of service with beautiful place settings, clean tables and floors. Train your support staff to swiftly and quickly clean and re-set tables as soon as the party departs from their meal.
- Educate the wait staff on the details of each menu item, so they can clearly describe nightly specials or answer any questions a guest may have about the ingredients, flavor or preparation methods of a dish.
- Utilize support staff in all areas of your restaurant. Support staff can include: food runners for busy meal times, a bartender for table orders only and an individual assigned to keeping refills maintained on tables.

A customer is more willing to accept a higher-price point if they feel taken care of. A well-rounded dining experience proves to the customer that their money was well-spent and that their time in your restaurant was respected.



It's not just because you use the freshest ingredients or the popularity of the name-brand chef you hired. When people dine outside of the house, **they expect to receive service.**

Quick-Serve to Fast-Casual Restaurants

Cheaper food does not justify a lower level of service standards. There is a lot of competition for burgers, pizza, hot dogs or fried foods out there.

Make your restaurant the sparkling gem of a deal.

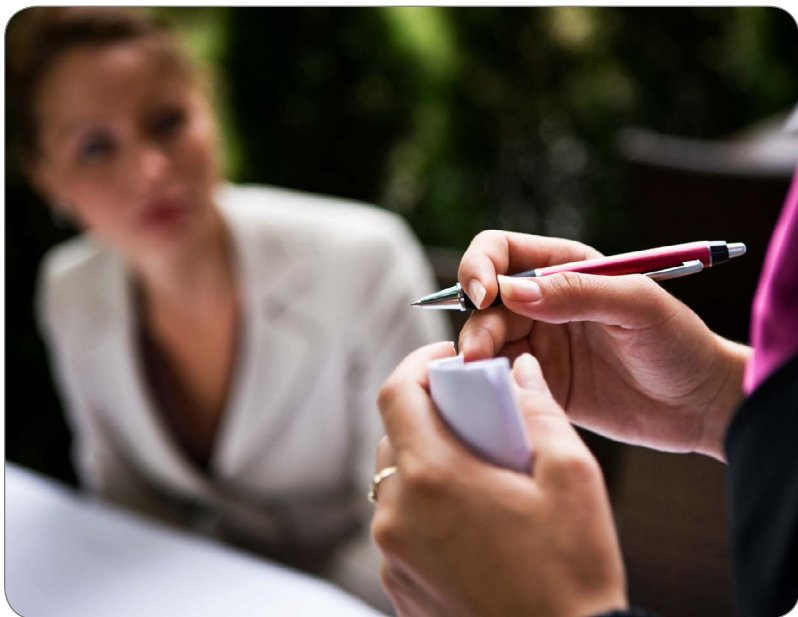
- Communicate menu knowledge to all of your service staff. Everyone should be able to answer customer questions about your menu items, including: ingredients, vegetarian options or portion sizes.

- Train your staff to be friendly with customers. A warm greeting, smile and “thank you” can make all the difference for the customer experience.
- Take pride in your packaging and presentation. Train your staff to keep to-go containers and bags clean, free of leaks and grease spots.

Deliver amazing prices, correctly prepared food and attentive service and you will have loyal customers for life. Keep your restaurant clean, friendly and on an efficient system of speedy service with a smile.

8. Value

Always value your customers and treat them with respect. It is important to remember that when you are providing a service to a customer, you are in service to the customer –not their servant, nor their mother or father. Friendly smiles are welcome in every language and prompt attentive service is appreciated by patrons everywhere.



It is equally important to value a customer's time. If it is busy and there is a bit of a wait for anything, stay in communication with the table and let them know you haven't forgotten them. Keep up on refills and never leave a table waiting, wanting or worried.

Remember, every customer who walks through your door expects to be valued. And if you miss the initial opportunity to treat them right, you have likely missed a second opportunity to try again.

Truly valuing your customer involves respecting their time, money and choice to visit your business.

9. Impact

In every single way you or your employees interact or communicate with a customer, there is an impact on the customer's opinion of your business. In your training and daily communication with your employees, remind them that when they are in view of customers, they are on stage. How your employees act and what they say impacts your customer's perception of the overall dining experience.

Watch what you say.

Consider this scenario: A group of guests are sat immediately after happy hour ended. The server approaches and says “Oh shoot, you just missed happy hour!” The server then proceeds to take the drink order without a second thought.

Telling the customer what they missed sets them up for disappointment, not anticipation.

This entire situation can easily turn into a positive customer service experience with a little empowerment given to the staff. If the customers truly just missed it, the server could cheerfully offer happy hour prices for the first round and then charge full-price thereafter. Not only does this offer a deal to the guest, it advertises your happy hour and gives them incentive to come back.

Consider the different ways your employees can impact a customer's decision to return to your business.

10. Timing

Timing is everything in the food service business. And it begins with the first approach a server makes with their customers.

Avoid auto-pilot. When a server first approaches their table, many restaurants require that they greet the guest and rattle off the specials. But when a guest first sits down to settle in, they may not be ready to process all of the information.

Instead, begin with a warm welcome and ask if they would like to hear about the specials now or after the drinks are served. Work with the guests to adjust to their attention span and level of comfort. It only takes seconds to ask, and describing the daily specials after they've had a minute to settle in can easily provide a warmer level of comfort.



Pacing the meal. Part of your server training needs to include the timing of the meal. If your menu has appetizers, soup, salad, entrees and dessert, then your servers need to fully understand the art of timing. Review when each course should be ordered from the kitchen to avoid everything arriving to the table at once.

Clearing plates. Communicate with your employees on how to approach tables between courses. An example of what to avoid includes: asking a customer if they are "Still working on that." This phrase should be avoided at all times. Your customers aren't "working," they are hopefully enjoying their meal. Train your staff to ask politely, "May I take your plate?" Or, if the table is large enough and food remains on the plate, instruct your servers to leave it there until the next course arrives. They can then politely offer to take the plate away *before* reaching for it.

Respect the customer's privacy. Customers' conversations are considered private unless they invite the server into the fold. Talkative servers and bartenders may mean well, but they are not the reason the customer chose to go out to eat. Communicate with your staff on how to respect the privacy of your customers. This includes refraining from butting in to conversations or lingering at the table with personal stories.

Check in and stay within eyesight. When the food is served, train the server or food runner to pause and ensure that the customer has everything they need. Then, check back a few minutes after to further assure that everything is as expected.

Communication should be attentive, but not intrusive. Each server should remain within eyesight of their tables to assist with any requests, refills or anything other issues that may require attention.

Presenting the check. The end of the meal is as important as the start. The meal service and food could be flawless, but if a guest is left sitting at the table too long when they are ready to leave, it can kill an otherwise perfect performance.



Train your servers to have the check ready after the main course. They can carry it in a check presenter while they go to take the coffee and dessert order. If the guest declines, offer the bill. If not, ring it in and print a new check.

Collecting the payment. Equally important is collecting the bill from the guest and bringing back the change or receipt to sign. Remind the servers that this is the last impression they are making on the table – and it could very well affect the tip as well as the experience.

Exemplary customer service provides a bridge for loyal customers. Provide your employees

with the right tools and skills to serve a consistent level of excellence to all of your guests. Find your recipe for success in the core ingredients of customer service: value, respect, training and communication.

Call a sales representative at **1-877-877-4379** or visit FoodServiceWarehouse.com today to find out more!



- i http://blogs.hbr.org/taylor/2011/02/hire_for_attitude_train_for_sk.html
- ii <http://www.restaurantrevolution.com/restaurant-customer-service-that-rocks/>
- iii <http://www.forbes.com/2009/10/30/simon-cooper-ritz-leadership-ceonetwork-hotels.html/>
- iv <http://www.restaurantrevolution.com/restaurant-customer-service-that-rocks/>

About FoodServiceWarehouse.com

FoodServiceWarehouse.com was founded in June of 2006 with a single business goal in mind: empowering food service operators to make their own businesses more successful. At FoodServiceWarehouse.com, we offer step-by-step assistance throughout the entire process of learning about and shopping for restaurant equipment and supplies. Our vast selection and educational resources create an incredibly comprehensive yet straightforward online shopping and learning experience, especially directed toward the bar and nightclub owner and operator.

When it comes to learning tools and resources, our one-of-a-kind Education Center is a great place to start. A library of free online articles, buying guides and downloadable tools gives you a comprehensive look at the food service industry from the inside out, and our Bar Specialty Store provides in-depth focus on the beverage industry specifically. When you need supplies, look no further than our Web site, where we offer over 100,000 items from nearly 300 manufacturers. To date, over 7,000 bars have come to us for supplies.

Our combination of comprehensive research materials, extensive product selection and customer-focused support process make FoodServiceWarehouse.com a one-of-a-kind experience for anyone in the food or beverage industry. For more information, please visit our website at www.foodservicewarehouse.com.



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