

SOLVING GUEST PROBLEMS OR COMPLAINTS - NOW OR NEVER

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While traveling this summer I visited one of my favorite restaurants, a small but cozy place in a resort town. I was surprised to see it only half full on a Friday night, because the last time I was there I waited 20 minutes on a Wednesday night just to grab a barstool.

When Greg, the co-owner, peaked out from the back room, I asked him what was up. Sure, bad economy, he said, but there was something more. He explained that a couple months ago a server had a disagreement with a guest over a now-forgotten problem or complaint. The server, who had since been let go, wouldn't back down and the guest stormed out of the restaurant in a huff. Greg found out about it weeks later, when asked by a regular guest if he had read the scathing review on the local page of a prominent travel website, attacking everything from the service and the food to the atmosphere.

Greg contacted the travel website and found that like most of these types of websites, since the review was simply someone's opinion they would not take it down. There was nothing Greg could do except write a response to the review, which he did. But the damage had been done.

Twenty years ago when I began developing hospitality and service training, we used a rule of thumb that a dissatisfied customer would typically tell four people, who then might tell another four people, for a total of 16 people who might know about their problem or complaint.

But in today's world you can easily have 16 *thousand* people who know of the problem thanks to e-mail, texting, Facebook, Twitter, podcasts, not to mention travel and restaurant review sites. I'll leave strategies for tracking your restaurant's e-image to a future article, but the issue points to the importance of solving a guest's problem or complaint before they leave your restaurant.

Just like the rule for a happy relationship that says you should never go to sleep angry (some people have lost a lot of sleep that way), you should never let a guest leave your restaurant with an unresolved problem or complaint. Once an unhappy guest has left the building, it's out of your control. Anything can happen.

Empowering and training your staff to successfully deal with guest problems or complaints on the spot can have an immediate effect on your top and bottom line. Here are four simple steps to immediately solving a guest problem or complaint:

1. **Apologize.** Listen to the guest's problem or complaint and then say you're sorry, even if it isn't your fault. Saying, "I'm sorry that happened," or, "I'm sorry you had a problem," isn't an admission of guilt, it's showing the guest that you empathize with their perspective and understand that a problem has occurred or that their expectation wasn't met.
2. **Mobilize.** What is the best way to resolve the problem as quickly as possible? Mistakes or problems vary in two ways: in terms of the restaurant's responsibility for the problem and seriousness of the issue. If a problem is something the restaurant couldn't have prevented and is not very serious (i.e. a 20 minute wait for a table), the solution may be as simple as a sincere

apology. But if the problem is something the restaurant should have prevented and is a serious issue (i.e. a food safety or sanitation issue) then the solution may require all available resources and strategies, including compensation, to make it right for the guest.

3. **Finalize.** Explain the solution to the guest. Tell the guest what you're going to do and when. Don't blame others and go into detailed explanations of why something happened, focus on the solution. Will the solution satisfy the guest? Ask him or her, using an open-ended question: "How does that sound?" or "What else can we do to make it right?"
4. **Analyze.** After the dust has cleared, discover the root cause of the problem. Discuss the issue with key staff or bring it up for discussion at a staff meeting or training session. Take action and institute policies or procedures that will prevent similar problems in the future. The best solutions are ones that are implemented before the problem arises.

It is important that you work with your service team so that they understand and share your commitment to service and solving guest problems at the time they occur. Empowerment is critical too: your employees must have the power to make decisions and implement solutions that can effectively deal with these issues. Training your staff on guest service principles and service recovery techniques can make a significant impact on guest satisfaction and building repeat business.

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