

## Service — Above and Beyond



# F & B

When general managers and food and beverage directors of Native American casinos meet with us following a mystery shop, they often ask, "How do we get our restaurants to the next level?" What they're asking is, "How do we improve? How do we excel?"

Sometimes they're referring to something more concrete: the Mobil or AAA ratings. Mobil starting ranking casino restaurants outside of Las Vegas and Atlantic City only in the last few years. Their awards range from one to five stars. AAA has been ranking casinos and casino restaurants for quite some time. Their awards range from one to five diamonds.

North America's largest resort casino, Foxwoods in Ledyard, Conn., has a Four Diamond rating for one of its hotels, Grand Pequot Tower, and Four Diamonds for one of its restaurants, Paragon. In Arizona, The Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Casino Resort has garnered Four Diamonds, and their fine-dining restaurant, Kai, Five Diamonds.

What makes a restaurant deserving of Five Diamonds or Five Stars? Attention to details and the willingness to go the extra step to make a guest's experience memorable. Think back to your most recent exceptional dining experience. What made it special? Was it the service? The food? The ambiance? All of these probably played a part.

A well-trained restaurant staff is the first step in the process. Training allows servers to be confident in their technical skills, hostesses in their communication skills and supervisors in their management skills. Some things I notice in a well-trained staff:

#### Arrival & Departure

- Quickly greeted at the door, with a smile
- Acknowledged by name, if a returning guest
- Met at the table by a member of the service team when handed over by the hostess
- Thanked and invited to return by a member of the service staff
- Someone at the hostess stand to say goodbye and to ask about our experience

#### Service Team

- Smiles and seems to like their jobs
- Exhibits camaraderie and teamwork — guests notice!
- Anticipates a guest's needs:
  - Refills beverage glasses without having to be asked
  - Uses a marking tray so the guest has the silverware required for the next course
- Uses a pivot system so food isn't "auctioned"
- Practices dining room-appropriate language: No, "How are you guys?"

#### Managers/Supervisors

- Are enthusiastic and outgoing
- Are visible and touch every table
- Encourage staff
- Monitor and correct service

The best staffs are empowered by management to do whatever it takes to make the guest's dining experience a special one. Sometimes an employee might have to bend rules or policies to exceed a guest's expectations. When management not only allows this, but also encourages the staff to be creative, both staff and diners benefit.

**“ Training allows servers to be confident in their technical skills, hostesses in their communication skills and supervisors in their management skills. ”**

By David Rothschild



Following the pre-shift meeting, one Maitre d' I worked for would exclaim every night as we opened the dining room doors, "Showtime!" as a reminder that we were now on stage. It wasn't just a job, it was a show, and we all had our parts to play.

It's important that the kitchen and dining room staffs share the vision of elevated service. We need to get away from: "This isn't my table." "It's restaurant policy." "No special requests."

Providing "above-and-beyond" service just comes down to being thoughtful. What would I like the server to do if I were the diner? A good server knows how to "read" a table. Every group of guests is different, each with its own expectations and timetable. That's one of the reasons I prefer to have my servers present menus. This helps the server control the timing of the meal. He can ask if I'd like to see a menu. Many times, I'm not ready to look; I just want to sit and relax for a few moments. A nearby table of diners, though, might be eager to return to the casino, and he can pace their meal accordingly.

Of course, I love to see servers using their "tools of the trade" to level a wobbly table or assist a guest who's forgotten his glasses with a magnifier or spare reading glasses. I recently read about a restaurant in a city with frequent, heavy rainfall that had monogrammed umbrellas on hand for guests to use and keep. A long-time restaurateur who dined in a restaurant I managed was most impressed that the servers led guests to the restrooms rather than merely pointing them in a direction (Never point in a restaurant!).

As a guest, I want to know that my server is invested in my dining experience, I enjoy being walked through the menu with mouthwatering descriptions by an enthusiastic server. When I mention that my wife and I will be sharing a first course and our waiter offers, "May I have that split for you in the kitchen?" or I gush over the dessert and he says, "If you'll leave me your e-mail address, I'll have the chef send you the recipe," I've just joined his fan club. We once commented on how good the bread was and asked to have the remaining roll wrapped to go. The server returned with a take-out box containing two rolls so, "Now you both can enjoy them for breakfast." Wow! In a fine-dining setting, when fresh glasses of ice water are presented at the end of the meal, prior to dessert, I know the staff is paying attention to the details.

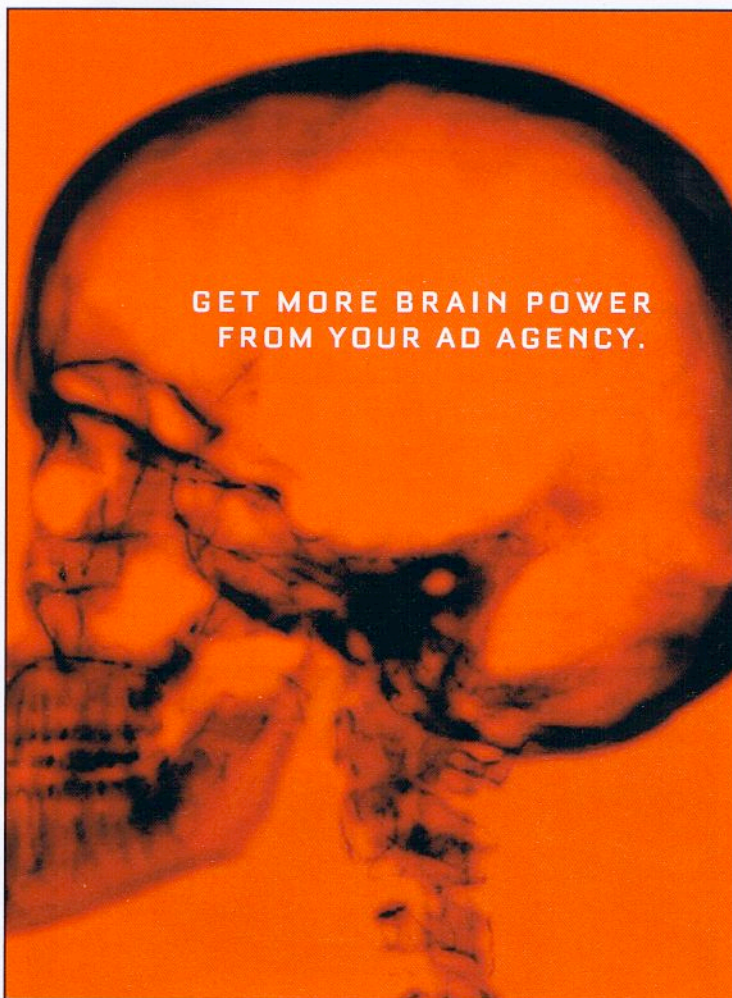
We've all heard stories like these: A group of southern conventioners came into the resort restaurant three nights in a row and asked for the same server. At the end of the meal, they playfully ordered sweet potato pie knowing full well that it was not available. When they said they were coming in with a larger party the next day, the server went to a local soul food restaurant and bought a pie. When asked for the non-menu item, he replied, "Certainly," and presented it to the astonished guests.

There's the tale of the restaurant manager who corrected an incomplete take-out order by delivering it in person... The story of a server going down the street to get a guest a cappuccino when the restaurant didn't serve it... The server who removes an item from a guest check because the guest was less-than-fully satisfied. There are so many relatively simple, but unexpected ways you can elevate your service.

The end of the meal is the time to leave a lasting impression. Upgrade your coffee service. Do a taste-test of various coffees from your purveyors. Introduce rock sugar stirrers or sugar straws. Make sure you utilize check sleeves. A server at a casino restaurant in California presented our check in a journal, filled with guest's comments about their restaurant experience. Nice touch! Consider including some sort of *mignardise* (bite-sized confections or pastries) with the check presentation. A few chocolate truffles and mini bear claws is a heck of a lot nicer than two wrapped, commercial candies.

One last illustration to get you thinking: While on vacation, we dined at a Baltimore restaurant. A week or so later, we received a note in the mail. It thanked us for dining with them and expressed the hope that the next time we were in town we'd make it a point to return. It was written and sent by our server. The next time we're in Baltimore, we WILL make it a point to go there. **NAC**

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