

TURNING RANTERS INTO REGULARS

by David Rothschild

One of our most requested enrichment workshops for casino restaurant wait-staffs, managers and supervisors is Customer Problems and Problem Customers (Yes, they are two different things!). I start by presenting a series of optical illusions.



Can you see both the young woman and the old woman?



Which do you see first the profiles or the goblet/glass?

The two pictured below are classics most attendees have come across at one time or another. They never have trouble seeing the profiles and the goblet. Many, however, see the young woman but have difficulty seeing the old woman. I ask those who do see both to try to help those having difficulty. Eventually, everyone is usually able to see both halves of the illusions.

My follow-up question to the group is this: What does this activity have to do with dealing with customer problems?

Lots of blank looks.

Finally, I see a light go on as someone responds, "It means everything can be looked at from at least two perspectives."

Now I have them thinking.

Another question I pose: How might you know a customer hasn't enjoyed his/her meal? Sometimes they're reluctant to complain.

By being sensitive to a guest's needs, a server can tell a guest is unhappy with either the food or the service. We call these the subtle signs of guests' dissatisfaction. Here's a partial list:

- Looking irritated
- Avoiding eye contact
- Not starting to eat after his meal is delivered
- Asking to see a menu after his food has been served
- Saying (unconvincingly) everything is "okay"
- Looking around the dining room; attempting to make eye contact with staff
- Not finishing any part of his meal
- Abruptly requesting the check

Surveys have shown that only one in 20 customers who have a problem in your restaurant will complain. That one complaining customer gives you the opportunity to correct a problem you didn't know existed. Most guests don't complain; they just don't come back. In addition, it's estimated that an unhappy guest tells an average of 11 other people about his/her bad experience. We not only lose their business, but we may lose the business we would have gotten from their friends and family. When we turn around an unhappy or irate customer, they will give the restaurant a second chance. Very often, if the situation is resolved quickly and to their satisfaction, they become a loyal, regular guest.

Food and beverage servers need to be empowered to take action when they deem it necessary. They should

clearly understand what they can do on their own before they need to involve a supervisor. Most restaurants permit the front-line staff to replace food for any reason if the guest is dissatisfied. When a guest requests (or demands) that an item or items be removed from the check, that usually means a manager should be involved.

When dealing with the guest's problem, you need to have an open mind, stay calm and maintain an even tone. Show that you care. Give them a chance to vent. Remember: Don't take what they have to say personally. This is not about you.

Here are the four steps in dealing with the dissatisfied diner:

1. Listen to the Guest

- Follow his description of the complaint step-by-step. Take notes if necessary. Ask for relevant details.
- Try to understand the guest's point of view.
- Use eye contact and body language to convey your interest and concern.
- Allow him all the time he needs to explain

2. Apologize for the Situation

- Restate the guest's remarks in your own words.
- Always offer an apology specific to the situation.
- Do NOT make excuses or blame another employee or department.
- Show empathy for the guest's situation.
- Never suggest that the guest's problem is a common occurrence.
- Communicate to the guest your desire to make the situation right.

3. Determine a Solution

- Mentally review the available options.
- Consider the facts and the restaurant guidelines.
- Prioritize options and take action.
- If the solution is not within your authority, explain to the guest that you will need to bring a manager over.

4. Follow Up

- Once action has been completed, follow up with the guest.
- Make sure the guest is satisfied with the solution.

- In all cases, notify the manager of any problems, even if you think they have been successfully resolved.
- Brief the manager with pertinent details. Get him involved, if necessary.

Problem guests are a totally different challenge. They include: the overly-amorous guest who is bothering another guest or one of your staff members; the inebriated guest, who can be a danger to himself and to others; the guest who can't pay (or refuses to pay) his check. In all of these cases, it's best that a supervisor deal with the situation. Get the guest away from the table, if possible, to speak with him alone in a quiet area of the restaurant. It's a good idea to have back-up nearby including, if you deem it necessary, a member of your security staff.

Your property has (or should have) specific guidelines on how to handle customers who are causing disturbances. Be sure your staff is familiar with the procedures to follow before the occasion arises.

The best general advice I can give in dealing with problem guests is to keep your temper in check and avoid being confrontational. The more calmly and rationally you approach things, the better the chance of defusing the situation before it escalates. There is also the occasional guest that, no matter what a server does to please him, nothing makes him happy. I always suggest that the server turn him over to another server to try a fresh face and approach on him.

We need to empower our staff with the tools to deal with most guests' problems. Use real-life situations your staff has encountered to discuss how to properly handle each incident. Role-playing with your staff during pre-shift meetings is a good way to illustrate appropriate ways to deal with customer problems and problem customers. Continue to stress that it needs to be everyone's goal to make every single guest's experience, every night, a positive one. Challenge your team to turn every irate (or even mildly displeased) customer into the biggest fan of your restaurant and staff. **NAC**

David Rothschild is co-owner of EATiQuette, a Phoenix-based waitstaff training company specializing in on-site certificate training programs for casino food and beverage departments. He can be reached at (602) 569.2051 or David@EATiQuette.com.