

Management

A Simple Seven-Step Solution

Take the Fear Out of Handling Complaints

Picture your guest giving you an unexpected gift wrapped in shiny, gold, paper with a big, red ribbon on top. How would you feel?

Now hold on to that feeling. That is exactly how you should feel when a guest complains to you-as if you are getting a gift. Why? Because guests who complain are giving you a second chance to make it right for them instead of taking their business elsewhere.

Approximately 4% of disappointed guests will voice their complaint to a company. Therefore, you should be more concerned about the continued patronage from 96% of your guests who will not convey their dissatisfaction to you.

Of the guests who complain, about 95% will continue patronizing a restaurant when the complaint is resolved quickly and in their favor. However, did you know that you can actually receive stronger positive word-of-mouth advertising from successfully recovering complaints from disappointed guests as opposed to the advertising you would receive from pleased guest?

When guests complain, they are communicating some level of dissatisfaction. Many times it may be a simple matter to resolve, such as reheating soup. Other times it may call for cooking several food entrees that were incorrectly ordered or prepared.

No matter how busy you are, always take ownership and make it a priority to quickly and professionally resolve all complaints. Adopting a company attitude to always please your guests and take all complaints seriously will pay off in repeat business. If you ignore your guest concerns, they may ignore your establishment when planning their next meal out.

Taking a complaint professionally, not personally, is important. Although angry guests may take their dissatisfaction out on

you, they are seldom upset with you as an individual. In most cases, they may just need to vent their feelings and be acknowledged. Be sure to focus on the issue, not the delivery of the complaint. If other guests can hear the complaint, lead the dissatisfied person to a secluded area. A complaint that gets out of hand may disturb the good time of other guests.

Training your staff to professionally handle service issues is imperative. Listed below are seven steps to successfully handling complaints. Some complaints, depending on the degree (like the soup example), can be resolved in fewer than the specified seven steps. Use your best judgment in taking the necessary steps to recover complaints.

Seven steps to successfully handling complaints

1. Listen carefully and thank the guest. Listening will help you properly identify the complaint. Listen with your eyes and your ears by observing verbal and body language. Always show sincerity and concern for the guest's feelings and thank them. For example, say, "Thank you for making us aware of this."

2. Ask questions and repeat the complaint. This will ensure that you have understood the concern properly and can act on it immediately, and correctly solve it the first time. For example, say, "Let me verify...you wanted your steak cooked medium rare...is that correct?"

3. Apologize sincerely. This shows respect for the guest's feelings. Fifty percent of service providers do not

offer any apology. Always take full responsibility for the complaint, whether or not you feel it is valid or your fault. For example, you might say, "I'm sorry for the mistake...please accept my apologies"

4. Empathize with the guest. This helps the guest feel confident you are on their side and partnering to work with them. For example, say, "I understand how you feel."

5. Explain corrective action/alternatives. Place guests at ease by informing them immediately how their complaint will be resolved. For example, you might say, "I'll talk with the Chef/Cook now and have him/her prepare a new steak." Meanwhile, you may consider delivering a complimentary appetizer to the guest.

6. Promptly resolve the issue. Generally speaking, the quicker you correct a situation, the easier it will be to resolve. The longer you take to resolve an issue, the greater your run the risk that your guest's emotions will escalate, making the situation more difficult to resolve. Make every effort to quickly turn negative situations into positive ones.

7. Follow up, thank the guest, and apologize again. Follow up to ensure guests are happy and have everything they need. Thanking them and apologizing again -will show appreciation for their feelings. For example, say, "Thank you for bringing this to our attention, and again, please accept our apologies."

Pam Simos is the President of Five Star Training. Her company specializes in reducing labor and maximizing profits through training. She has 30 years of experience in the hospitality industry and a B.S. degree in Hotel/Restaurant Management. She offers a full line of training services for managers and staff including seminars, new restaurant openings, consulting, keynote speaking, and company manuals. Five Star Training is based in St. Petersburg, Florida. For questions, information, and/or a complimentary consultation contact Pam at: Web address: www.five-startraining.com. E-mail: contact-us@five-startraining.com. Toll-free: (800) 385-7827(STAR).