



Are You Selling Food – or Providing Guest Experiences?

Whether you own or operate a casual carry-out seafood and crab house or a fine dining table-service restaurant on the water, food quality is critically important. Yet, it is only one component of what makes people come back. In reality, the food that a guest experiences during a visit may be minimally important compared to whether the guest experience is positive enough to make those folks return.

Dozens of clients and friends, who own various types of restaurants, tell me that they just do not get it! They receive very good reviews, which note that the owners are nice people and serve good food. In fact, when the owners talk to guests who frequent their establishment, their guests seem to categorically say, “You have a nice place here.” Yet, owners also say their guest counts are stagnant, business is slowing down, that regulars are plenty but just not growing.

So, what’s the problem?

Time after time, after doing due diligence, or often just because I know a business or location well enough, the answer comes down to a poor or average guest experience. Allow me to cite a simple, specific example of what fair and outstanding experiences do and could look like.

I frequent a carry-out-only crab house near my home, likely two or three times per month. I do love cracking those crabs, and this place has consistently good ones, at very fair prices. When I call to place my order, often the owner either recognizes my voice, or when I provide my name, he acknowledges it with a friendly “hello” or “thanks for your business.”

However, while I have been frequenting the restaurant for a long



time now, the two staff members who work the counter have yet to remember my name. Nor has the owner, at least from appearances, made it a point to let his employees know that I am a regular, and that they could and should greet me by name. Additionally, it seems no one there has ever been trained to say, “Thanks for coming in!” Or... “It is brutally cold out there, did you have to drive a long way?” Or... “How were your holidays? Do you have any nice warm vacations coming up?”

Small talk is not small

In fact, the experience is a deafening silence of no engagement, and when several guests wait for their orders, it is almost uncomfortably quiet. Training staff to make small talk could be invaluable. For example, engage guests by

impromptu conversation, such as, “Anybody here love potato salad or slaw? We have homemade salads that are great additions to the crabs! Anyone want a sample? Step right over and let us feed you!” This is not only inviting, but it’s likely good for business.

Samples as an icebreaker

Another way this establishment could engage guests is to take some of that salmon fillet from the display box during a busy evening, cook it just right, prepare bite-sized pieces, and announce, “We are inviting you to try our soy-ginger salmon. Don’t be afraid to take some home with you, and we will give you the recipe!” Go a step further and make it personal, saying, “Hey, Henry, have a bite and tell Sally what you think. Sally is also a regular, like you, who always comes

in for crabs...and we have lots more that will make you happy!”

Overall, I would more readily recommend this place if I felt that the staff tried to make guests feel like friends and tried to make my experience a special one every time I walk in the door. Make it a mission to create an unforgettable experience that will encourage guests to rave about your restaurant — and their special guest experience — on Yelp, Trip Advisor, and Facebook.

It’s not just the food! It’s that AND the experience! Not sure how to get there? Reach out any time, and I am happy to help.

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