

Mysterious Ways

Customer service goes undercover

By Jim Davidson

Are you certain your staff meet or exceed the customer's expectations at every touch-point? What's the best way to obtain objective feedback? While many operators might simply explain that they already invite customers to complete a response card or online survey, others are digging even deeper into improving customer service with the addition of a mystery shopper program.



A mystery shopper, also known as a secret shopper or mystery guest, looks and sounds just like a typical customer. The difference is that he or she visits a foodservice establishment "incognito" and completes a detailed checklist after leaving the establishment. It's similar to the "Undercover Boss" television show.

The mystery shopping exercise provides comprehensive objective feedback on all aspects of the customer experience such as friendliness of staff, product knowledge, product presentation and cleanliness of the facility.

During a number of mystery "shops" conducted this past November, we visited a cross-section of independent and chain restaurants in several regions across Canada. The mystery-shopped restaurants included:

- 1) Regional chain sit-down
- 2) National chain sit-down
- 3) Independent sit-down
- 4) Independent cafe
- 5) National premium burger chain
- 6) Independent pizza, delivery

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE TIPS GENERATED BY OUR RECENT VISITS:

1. Acknowledge Customers As They Enter and Exit

Employ the five-foot and 10-foot rule. That is, an approaching customer should be acknowledged within 10 feet and greeted within five feet. At one of the national sit-down chains, a group of employees walked within inches of the exiting mystery shopper and acted as though the mystery shopper was not there – an obvious customer-service no-no.

2. Ensure that the Menu, Tables, Seats and Floor are Clean

At the independent cafe, the menu was dirty and sticky. The menu is an important



marketing tool; it informs patrons about product offerings and price points. A soiled menu says a lot about the business: If the menu that the customer holds and sees is unclean, then he or she might question the level of care taken behind the scenes.

The tables at both the independent cafe and premium burger place were sticky.

At the premium burger place, a child spilled their soft drink on the floor. The counter person was fairly quick to bring a mop, bucket and a caution sign, but the floor was still sticky. The garbage bin, immediately adjacent to the spill, was overflowing, and seemingly unnoticed by staff. When the counter person returned to her station, there was no evidence that she had washed her hands; she simply walked from the lobby to the back of the counter. Employees need to remind themselves of the importance of washing their hands as soon as they re-enter the counter/food preparation area – both from the standpoint of hygiene and brand image. Staff should always be asking themselves: “Would I want to eat food that was prepared by someone who had just emptied the trash bin without washing their hands afterwards?”

3. Be Attentive

Ensure that the customer is having a great experience. In bygone days, it was critical to resolve an issue before the customer left the establishment. Today, they'll post comments on Facebook and Twitter real-time.

Wait staff at both sit-down chains asked how things were going. But, the difference in delivery was striking. One server was interested and very sincere. At the other restaurant, the host touched the table, kept walking and inquired over his shoulder: “You're OK at his table too?”

Initially, the server at the regional chain was on top of things. After the two other lunch parties left the small dining room, the

mystery shopper waited and waited to be further served – and then decided not to order dessert.

4. Problem-Solve

Typically, the customer does not want to wait for the manager to address an issue. Empower frontline employees to make decisions.

At the independent sit-down, the mystery shopper requested to have a dollar added to the bill in exchange for a loonie for parking. He was given a loonie, and was elated that nothing was added to the bill.

At the regional sit-down chain, the server's initial response to a mystery shopper's complaint seemed ideal at first:

Mystery Shopper: “The nachos are great. The salad is great. But, the beef sandwich is bland and rubbery”.

Server: “What can we do?”

MS: “I was planning to take it with me. It's the last thing I would eat.”

[Server went to speak with the manager.]

S: “The manager said there's nothing we can do because you said that you're taking it with you”.

MS: “As I said it has no taste”

S: “There's nothing I can do”

The customer should not walk away unhappy. The server needs to be empowered to make things right. An item deducted from the bill or a complementary meal is fairly insignificant relative to the life-time value of a retained customer.

5. Re-Check the Washroom

The washroom is a critical component of the restaurant experience. Mystery-shopped washrooms varied from fairly inviting to very unsanitary.

The washroom at the premium burger place was grungy, the toilet and sink had not been cleaned in quite some time and there was no soap in the dispenser.

The washroom at the regional sit-down chain was very old, gray and tired looking. A hand-written sign above the toilet tank read, “Hold down the handle”; it looked as though it had been there a very long time. The yellowed bowl looked as though it had not

been scrubbed since the restaurant first opened. There was paper towel sitting on the inside-bottom of the urinal.

The independent cafe had water stains in the sink – easily removed with a good cleanser.

One of the national sit-down chains was renovated within the past six months. The tiled walls and light fixtures were quite attractive. The oversight was that the taps on the sink required turning; there was no way to turn the taps without cross-contamination or wasting paper towels. Install hands-free faucets to reduce cross-contamination and to provide greater accessibility to the elderly and people with arthritis.

6. Promote, Promote, Promote

We ordered a pizza from an independent via an on-line ordering site. The pizza's visual appeal and taste were eye-popping and mouth-watering. The void was a lack of branding – to prompt re-purchase. The pizza came in a plain white box. Small investments in brochures or business cards to attach to pizza boxes, an effective Facebook page and the company logo embroidered on employees' golf shirts will go a long way to spread the word.

A true “mystery shop” is unannounced. And, the manager and employees do not know that they were mystery shopped – until later. They should be at the top of their game at all times; every customer deserves the best, and the next customer could very well be a mystery shopper. The mystery shop report provides a detailed snapshot of the customer service experience.

For more ideas for improving customer service, visit



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