



Timing Really *Is* Everything

Your servers might know *how* to sell, but it's often just as important to know *when* to sell. And that goes for management, too.

One successful restaurant chain discovered its appetizer sales were falling dramatically. Management struggled to pinpoint the cause until a tableside investigation revealed that servers, as instructed in a service policy change, were delivering baskets of bread soon after guests were seated.

By the time the server arrived to suggest an appetizer, it was too late. Most guests, stuffed on sourdough and pumpernickel, were ready for the main course. Dessert sales were also suffering.


The moral of the story: Does your restaurant serve complimentary bread? Chips and salsa? Baskets of crackers? You may want to rethink when your staff makes these goodies available to guests.

The restaurant chain in this example changed its service policy to create more

sales opportunities. Servers now make beverage and appetizer recommendations before the bread comes.

And bread is just the beginning. If your staff delivers glasses of water to guests before servers suggest beverages and specialty drinks, you may be diminishing sales. Not by much, perhaps, but every little bit counts.

It's important that your servers practice suggestive selling, but they should take care not to overdo it. Imagine the poor guests who had in mind an affordable meal at your restaurant, only to come away with a healthy dose of sticker shock after an effective server sold them everything on the menu.

Those guests may decide your restaurant is too expensive and go elsewhere next time. If value is a major component of your operation's image, you may want to encourage your servers to suggest that guests split an appetizer or dessert. You'll still make the sale but avoid emptying wallets and purses. 


Getting the Inside Scoop

Often we bog ourselves down with external, uncontrollable factors—the hot new concept that just opened up down the street or the construction that's blocking our entrance—but our main focus should be, "What do customers want? And what are we doing to give it to them?" Here are some tips on how to get inside your customers' heads:

- **Listen up.** If the big boss was down for a visit, what would you do? Call a group meeting, roll up your sleeves, bring a notepad, create an action list and consider everything that was said as serious and important. But your customers are your biggest boss and most of their input is never heard. Instead, work the table. Ask specific questions—what would you change about your experience tonight?—and prompt real suggestions. Chart all comments—positive and negative—look for similarities and actively pinpoint areas of improvement.


- **Go for the group.**

Every quarter, pull together a select group of regulars and ask them if they'd be a member of your focus group. Feed them well when they are there—appetizers and drinks—and send them home with gift certificates as thanks. Ask tough questions—where else do you go? why? what's the primary reason you come here?—and be receptive to all comments, positive and negative.

- **Apologize well.** When a problem occurs, deal with it immediately and apologize sincerely. Then, if the customer agrees, ask for specifics: "Our customers are very important to us and we are always looking for ways to improve. If you have a minute, I would really value your input. How do you think this could be avoided? Has this happened to you here before? What changes could we make internally to ensure your satisfaction?" Then, listen well and reward the customer with a gift certificate. You'll gain a loyal customer and invaluable input. 

Put It To Work

The most expensive thing in a restaurant is an empty chair. To spread the word about your restaurant, consider the Value Cards contest. It's easy!

- Print up Value Cards that entitle the bearer to savings in your bar or restaurant. Include an expiration date and place for an employee signature. The cards can be buy-one-get-one offers, offers for a free dessert or appetizer, or a special promotion.
- Distribute an equal amount of cards to your staff members and encourage them to hand them out to friends, family... anyone other than current customers.
- Run a contest based on the most cards redeemed over a certain period of time. Take it to a higher level by tracking guest check averages when the cards are redeemed and awarding prizes based on those numbers, too. 

Excerpted from **Playing Games at Work: 52 Best Incentives, Contests and Rewards for the Hospitality Industry**, Red Book Solutions. Call **800-207-8140** to order or see more at www.RedBookSolutions.biz/F5404.html.

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