

The Guest

R E P O R T

Service excellence

Check out the bathroom as a service indicator

The elegant towel dispenser doesn't have any towels. Trash is overflowing in the imported wicker wastebaskets. And large splotches of water cover the beautiful marble sink counters.

These are signs of a restroom that may be taking a rest from service. Picture this elegant bathroom, designed to carry out the restaurant, hotel or attraction theme. Picture guests' faces as they gaze upon this disheveled scene and wonder how the establishment could allow such a contradiction to the rest of the experience.

While the bathroom may not rank high in overall service measurements for management priorities, it ranks high in the minds and memories of guests as an unfortunate revelation. A revelation that service starts at the front door and stops when its time to go to the bathroom. A revelation that service matters only sometimes and only in some places.

Just what does a messy bathroom reveal? Remember gas station commercials from the good old days, when clean bathrooms were actually a marketing feature and a way to get people to stop and do business?

Now, if customers encounter a messy bathroom, what does that reveal? Some guests or customers will experience a wave of uneasiness and conclude the place is not as clean or sanitary as it seems. They will extend those thoughts into the kitchen, workout facilities, retail or dressing areas.

Other customers may sense a lack of concern for guest comfort and the details that matter, a factor in considering whether to repeat the visit or discourage others from doing so. Some guests may find the experience so unbelievable or even humorous that the unflattering bathroom story becomes the focal point of any shared memory, probably not the original goal of the expensive, high gloss brochures.

What are some of the other undesirable or questionable impacts of bathroom distress?

What about the bathroom attendant who stands guard at the door, his/her laser beam gaze threatening tipless guests, whether they use the hairspray or not.

How about the housekeeper who comes in to mop the floors, during one of the evening's busiest moments, while guests slip and slide their way to their bathroom agendas.

What about the kitchen employee who walks out without washing his or her hands?

Remember the time when there was no more bathroom tissue, and the guests' realization of that fact – after the fact.

These are the types of service encounters that can cause great anxiety, not the supposed outcome most hospitality leaders desire.

Though most bathroom visits are brief, they represent powerful opportunities to add to or detract from any overall guest experience. Restrooms need service so they can be of service to guests. Hospitality leaders need to ensure personnel are tuned in and turned on to the bathroom experience as another powerful opportunity to impact any guest impression.

Those impressions may be based on efficiency combined with the sanitary needs of guests. To respond, some hospitality leaders have introduced technology in the bathroom to advance bathroom operations to new levels of operational performance.

Think about those automatic seat covers, the toilet sensors that respond to body movement and the sinks that magically dispense water when the guest is properly positioned.

But what happens when the automatic seat cover is jammed? How about the sensor that keeps on sensing before the guest is ready? And what about the temperamental sink that refuses

to flow unless the guest makes wild gestures while others at properly functioning sinks watch in amazement?

These wonderful gadgets represent wonderful intentions, especially when they are working. The unintentional disruptions are not so wonderful.

Who is paying attention to maintenance on a continual basis so that both guests and bathroom amenities end up in working order?

This attention to detail and the comforts that mean the most to guests go beyond the public bathroom experience. Hotel leaders and others who provide private bathrooms to guests must consider the same concerns and attention to detail.

In a recent conversation with one of South Florida's premier hotel owners, we discussed how wonderful a five-star resort could be – until one notices the mold in the grout in the marble bathroom.

Though in the business, as a hotel guest, he was disappointed to see that five star was really only on the surface and not a standard that was carried through each element of the property.

It's a small item with a big impact on guests. Who is monitoring these standards and who is paying attention to the details that matter most? Beautiful ambiance and decor come to a screeching halt when service checks out of the bathrooms.

To ensure bathroom bliss for all guests at all times, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Schedule regular maintenance checks in addition to cleaning the restrooms and increase the frequency of those checks as user numbers (your guests) increase.
- Some bathroom procedures include cleaning schedules on the back doors with checks on when the area was last cleaned. These may not be proactive enough and more random checking may be appropriate.
- Identify and clarify what standards your restrooms should have and ensure all personnel know what those expectations may be – and how to fulfill them.
- Ensure that bathroom personnel perform their duties in concert with guest activity, not against it or to interrupt it.
- Watch guest behaviors in restroom environments and see if there is anything that could be done to improve them.
- If long lines yield guest frustrations and discomfort, explore a better crowd flow system or consider more facilities.
- If supplies run out frequently, order more and have them available before they run out.
- Train personnel at all levels to care about this environment as they do the rest of their work areas and encourage attention to guest reactions.

Guests may not make or base decisions on bathroom ambiance, but they will remember the dirty or chaotic ones. Restore a guest service philosophy in this most intimate of environments – and rest assured your restroom service impact will lead to service excellence and in turn, repeat business – when and where it's least expected.

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