

The Guest

R E P O R T

You get no second chance to make a first – and I'll add lasting – impression. What an understatement in today's world of guest experience management.

Think about where, how and when the initial contact for any hospitality experience takes place. Was it when the guest walked through the door or earlier when the valet took the car or even earlier when that same guest called to make reservations? In today's techno-ready world, could that first contact even have been on the Internet with a simple request for information?

The issue, often missed by hospitality management, is the attention, training and focus necessary to define the desired experience at that initial contact. In fact, many bypass this impression-winning step because it is so brief relative to where guests actually spend their time and/or it seems insignificant in the big picture. What a missed opportunity!

Consider that the guest experience begins the moment guests decide to visit a restaurant, make hotel reservations, rent a car or take a cruise. When they make the first phone call to pursue their heart's desire, they are emotionally ready for their experience to begin.

Are employees at this relationship-beginning stage as ready for the experience as the guest? If this is a guest's first time to a restaurant, perhaps he or she will need directions or more information to celebrate a special occasion.

What happens next, when the employee answers the phone and "meets" the potential guest (with potential dollars), can be a winning, indifferent or losing move.

What kind of tone and voice impression takes place? Does the employee "smile" with his or her voice and welcome the guest, or sound rushed and inconvenienced by the phone call? Does this first contact sound like a script being read or a genuine introduction?

Are the instructions clear and in language that is articulate, slow and easy to understand, or are the words fragmented, insincere and undecipherable? Are guests told "no" when reservation times are unavailable, or are other options presented? Does that employee recognize the power of beginning the guest relationship in that moment?

Perhaps the moment of truth begins with the parking valet. Unfortunately, it is a rare occasion, in my opinion, when the valet sets the stage with an outstanding experience.

In many cases, a separate or "hired" company to greet guests and park their cars provides valet services. In the seamless delivery of service, that really doesn't matter. The restaurant, hotel, condominium, attraction, event or any other valet service provider must understand that initial contact with any valet may be the most impression-winning or anxiety-producing moment for that guest. And, it's not the guest's responsibility to figure that out or to manage it.

If a valet service, whether hired or not, is not creating the initial

Service excellence

Winning first impression is vital

contact desired or reinforcing the standards of that establishment, drive them out of the experience.

Define the impressions your parking valets give guests – such as a certain type of greeting, eye contact, reassurance, efficiency with long lines and safe car behavior (one of my favorites).

What kind of image do they have? Are they articulate and understandable? Do they instill trust as they take the keys to a guest's automotive pride and joy?

Is this first contact consistent with the service delivery of other employees who will receive and pass the baton at each point of contact? How frequently are the valet services observed and evaluated from the guest's point of view?

While many consider valet services as an essential step to "process" a guest into an experience, the valet moment actually represents a tremendous opportunity to "wow" a guest and exceed expectations through some very simple steps.

Initial contact for a destination may begin at the airport. Perhaps the porter at the baggage claim is a guest's first exposure to the area they are about to visit. Maybe the "starter" who gets the cab actually starts that guest experience.

Once again, are the employees in these roles processing the guests or are they embracing the opportunity to totally create the destination's first impression? If management trained individuals in these roles to do three simple things – welcome the guest to the area, look them directly in the eye, smile and thank them for visiting – would a guest be surprised by the extra effort placed on those first few seconds of initial contact? Would they feel more like a guest as opposed to the next number in the sequence or the next potential tip?

Whether that first contact begins with the receptionist, the cash register operator, the parking lot attendant, the Internet/e-mail respondent, the person who answers that first phone call or the driver who takes the car, there are endless opportunities to create an exceptional service experience through that first impression.

Studies show that guests, customers and clients remember the first and the last things that take place, more than the things in the middle.

Do you?

Setting the tone from the true beginning sets the stage for experiences guests will want to repeat.

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