

“Guest Service”

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Empowering employees to please your guests

Recently, TRC received an inquiry through its website from a Front Office Manager asking how to boost his problem resolution scores. This question is not uncommon, as many FOM's and Guest Service Managers must struggle with the issue of resolving complaints from guests while maintaining rate and fiscal integrity and minimizing rebates, comps, and potential allowances.

Empowering guest contact employees to resolve complaints on the spot is an ideal way to help increase complaint resolution scores. Empowerment authorizes front line employees to make on the spot decisions to override company policy, expend resources, or make the needed arrangements in order to satisfy guests without seeking prior approval from one's supervisor. It can be deemed as doing that which is reasonably necessary or appropriate to create or keep guests satisfied.

Immediate responsiveness is essential to ensuring guest satisfaction through employee empowerment. Today's consumer is highly educated and perceives his or her time as a valuable commodity. Generally, guests are no longer willing to wait for a front desk agent to obtain authorization from their supervisor in order to allowance off typical disputed charges such as phone calls or in room movies. If the front desk agent hesitates in assuring the guest that the complaint can be resolved to the guest's satisfaction, then often dissatisfaction is increased. In order for empowerment to work effectively, there are several additional prerequisites.

First, guest contact employees must know and feel that they have the unconditional support of hotel management (from their direct supervisor to the property GM) to do what it takes to satisfy the guest. If a manager were to question or second-guess an employee's response, he can be assured that the employee (and other employees) will be much more hesitant to seek to satisfy a disgruntled guest in the future without seeking approval from their supervisor. This is the "once bitten-twice shy" phenomenon. Guests usually want the problem resolved quickly and at the lowest management or employee level possible. Bear in mind that the higher up the complaint moves or the longer it takes to resolve the problem, the more the guest expects to be compensated.

Second, guest contact employees must be trained and educated in the art of service recovery. This means educating them about:

- the art of listening and then understanding guest complaints. Showing sincere empathy for a guest's dissatisfaction will earn an employee the trust and patience of the guest. But they must listen before they can ascertain the problem and suggest a remedy.

- the ideal verbiage to be used in the interaction with the guest. Some words and phrases are more appropriate and evoke a greater sense of understanding and responsiveness than others.
- the contextual cues that they emit (to include facial expressions and other body language). Customers actually interpret more from an employee's actions than the words they speak. The best verbal response can be compromised or counteracted by undesirable or unwelcome facial expressions or inappropriate body language demonstrated by the employee. Often, employees unknowingly send these signals without realizing the negative effects that such actions convey to the guest.
- the skill of reassuring the guest that the complaint will be resolved with minimal wait or hassles. This is what the guest is really seeking anyway, empathy.

Next, management must clearly define what steps guest contact employees may take and how much they may spend, authorize for compensation, or write off to satisfy a displeased guest. These parameters are crucial as this will be the benchmark by which the employee will judge whether a manager needs to become involved. For example, Ritz Carlton employees may spend, authorize for reimbursement, or compensate up to \$2000 per guest complaint to satisfy a guest. Now, this does not mean that each complaint results in a \$2000 fix. Usually, the resolution does not even require a monetary expenditure or loss to the hotel. But the policy is in place and available to Ritz Carlton employees to implement when needed. Clearly, what is not needed are delays, hesitation, uncertainty, and wasted time arriving at a potential solution that may or may not satisfy the guest.

It is appropriate to ask the guest directly what they would like from the hotel to rectify the unfortunate situation. Generally, guests often ask for something less than the hotel originally may have been willing to offer as compensation. Often, the guest wants nothing more than acknowledgement of the problem, an apology, and a promise to fix it for the future.

Frequently, guests are not seeking comps or freebies by complaining. They just want to be heard. Most of these guests want the problem resolved right away. Others want the problem resolved by the next time they visit the hotel again, or they don't want other guests to be subjected to their unpleasant experience. Actually, only a very small percentage is seeking some sort of compensation, especially at the deluxe hotel level.

Research has shown that only about 20% of guests actually complain. So complaints could be seen as opportunities to fix future problems that would likely result in complaints. Of the 80% of guests who do not complain, about half of them will not return. Yet, hotel management will not know why because the guest does not stop to complain or express their dissatisfaction. The prudent front office manager will thank their guests for complaining. How else will he or she know when a problem occurs? Complainers are just guests waiting to be satisfied but choose to let others know they are waiting.

Replacing lost customers who are dissatisfied is not as easy as satisfying them at the point of complaint. Research has also shown that it costs 7 times more to replace an existing customer with a new one, than to satisfy an existing one. So for every \$1 spent on complaint resolution through empowerment, a hotel would likely spend \$7 on average to replace a lost customer with a new one.

Finally, the concept of employee empowerment requires that a trust exist between the employee and management. Not only must each employee be able to rely on management's unconditional and unquestioning support when acceding to guests' demands, it is equally imperative that management have absolute faith and confidence in its most valuable asset, its human capital. Hotels invest large sums of money to recruit, select, and train the right employees for the right position. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that management only hire employees that have the skills, aptitude, and maturity to make and implement decisions in order to thrill their guests. Empowered personnel take responsibility, feel a sense of ownership, enjoy satisfaction in their accomplishments, and share in the knowledge that they are important to the hotel. Not only is empowerment a tool to quickly resolve guest dissatisfaction but it permits managers to concentrate on other operational and strategic aspects of hotel management. Basically, empowered employees enable managers to attend to other time consuming matters. After all, isn't time one of our most valuable commodities?

(Dr. William Frye is the executive editor of TRC and an assistant professor of hotel management at Niagara University. He conducts research and lectures in the areas of service quality and hotel operations management.)

To learn more about employee empowerment, consider reading these classic books:

- "Managing Knock Your Socks Off Service" by Chip R. Bell & Ron Zemke
- "Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service" by Kristin Anderson & Ron Zemke
- "Empowerment Takes More than a Minute" by Kenneth H. Blanchard, et al.
- "Positively Outrageous Service" by T. Scott Gross (an occasional contributor to TRC)