

F&B: Bussers — Who Needs 'Em?



by David Rothschild

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Busboy? Who needs a busboy? The short answer is: If you're a restaurant manager, you do.

Let's start with terminology: busboy, busperson, server assistant? Whatever you call them, they all do the same job; a very valuable one, I might add. Because many of the buspeople I encounter at restaurants are female, let's be politically correct and call them all bussers.

Of the casino restaurants I've been to lately, more and more have eliminated the busser position altogether in an effort to reduce payroll. Generally, bussers are paid more than waiters because they aren't directly tipped. On the surface, cutting out bussers seems to make sense. But the truth is, by eliminating or cutting back on bus help, you're lowering the standard of service in the restaurant.

Bussers are typically expected to stock the sidestation and restock it as needed throughout the meal. Sometimes they're responsible for polishing the silverware and glassware for the tables. They set, or help to set, the tables. At service time, they bring water, bread and butter, or chips and salsa. During the meal, they clear courses as finished, replenish beverages and help to maintain the integrity of the table by pre-bussing. They reset the tables for the next guests. Bussers take the bus carts back to the dish area, unload them and bring new carts and tubs back into the sidestation. They're often asked to stock and check the restrooms as well as vacuum the carpet; even wash windows and mirrors inside and outside of the restaurant.

Who's going to do all of these important tasks if there's no busser? The server? Ha! Most servers don't believe that bussing a table is their job. It seems they think it's somehow beneath them to clear dirty dishes to the bus station or reset a table. Ask them to sweep or do windows? You must be kidding!

Bussing is everyone's job, not just the busser's. As a manager, I always clear plates and glasses and pick up discards at the table. Guests like to see that the person in charge spots the little things and isn't afraid to get his hands dirty when necessary. Ultimately, the server is responsible for his station. That means the tabletop should always look presentable.

When we mystery shop a restaurant, invariably the first thing we see is improper bussing. It doesn't seem to matter if it's a gourmet restaurant, cafe or buffet. The staffs are not being trained in the proper way to bus a table. Here are my top tips for maintaining, clearing and resetting tables:

Sanitation, Sanitation, Sanitation

Please, managers, you can't observe a staff member sneezing or coughing into his hands and not correct it. Make him go wash his hands. Teach employees to sneeze or cough into their "elbow pits" instead of their hands.

No fingers in glasses. No fingers high on glasses (above the "lip line") or above the rim. No stacking glasses inside one another. Monitor that silverware is being handled hygienically while preparing

rollups or setting/clearing the table. Plateware needs to be handled only by the rim or edge.

When bussing a table, the dirty dishes always go to the bus cart, the bus cart or bus tub never goes to the table. The bus cart should remain in the bus station or in a discreet location in the restaurant. Servers and bussers should bus plates to the bus cart, scraping and separating plates according to size. Put glasses on the second shelf and silverware in a pre-soaking solution. The bottom shelf is usually used for recyclables such as bread baskets and linen napkins. The tables closest to the bus station are some of the most difficult to seat due to the high traffic and noise. Please work efficiently and quietly at the bus station. At some point, the bus cart has to be wheeled back to the dish area. No one wants to see dirty dishes paraded through the dining room. Cover the tubs with a few napkins or a tablecloth so the cart isn't quite as unsightly as it makes its way through the dining room.

A bar tray should be used for picking up glasses and smallwares. Don't shove placemats, napkins or other trash inside glasses — you know what I mean. I see this all the time. My wife and I jokingly call them "bussing sculptures." But it really isn't a work of art. Diners don't want to see you walk by juggling a towering pile of dirty dishes.

Never stack a guest's dishes in front of him when clearing. We shouldn't stack plates on top of one another, whether it's in our hands or on a bar tray. I don't recommend using a bar tray for clearing dinner plates; hand carrying is safer, more attractive and more professional. If your restaurant uses banquet trays for delivering food, don't mix dirty plates with fresh food. After the tray is unloaded, use it to clear another table in your section. Never go into the kitchen empty-handed.

Dirty dishes shouldn't be carried from one table to another that is still occupied by guests. I recently had a busser come to my table with a stack of dirty dishes in hand. He placed the entire stack on top of my plate to clear it, giving me a close-up view of the dirty dishes of three or four other diners. Ugh!

One of guests' most common complaints about service is observing the busser using the same sanitizing cloth to wash down the tabletop that he just used to crumb the seats. When cleaning a bare tabletop, never spray the sanitizer directly to the table. Fans and air conditioning blow the spray everywhere, including onto the food of the guests at nearby tables. Instead, spray the cloth then wipe the table. Use a second cloth to dry the tabletop. Make sure the salt and pepper shakers are wiped clean. A shaker that's sticky from being used by a previous diner is a real turnoff.

In tablecloth restaurants, never leave the tabletop bare. Always have a cloth with you when you remove the soiled one. Change it quickly without waving the cloth in the air as if it were a bedsheet coming out of the dryer.

Run a restaurant without bussers? Not if I have any say in the matter. In fact, when I need to send a team-member home, I'd almost always choose a waiter and keep a good busser. Bussers are essential to the smooth operation of a professional restaurant. They're also some of the hardest employees to find, hire and keep. If you have a good cadre of bussers, pat yourself on the back and be thankful. **NAC**

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