

BE EFFICIENT

By David Rothschild

A restaurant worker spends a lot of time on his feet, typically walking several miles each shift. Foot, leg and back problems are occupational hazards. I always preach the importance of investing in a pair of good shoes. Something else we should consider to minimize the wear and tear on our bodies: multitasking and efficiency of movement.

A good server is always prioritizing. He's juggling several different tables at various junctures in their meals. Orders have to be taken, picked up and delivered, a new table needs to be greeted, and a check needs to be dropped. To an experienced server, this becomes second nature. For a newbie, it's a different story.

I've watched a server do a turn-and-a-half, in place, much like a dog settling into bed; changing his mind as to what he was going to do next. The new table is a server's highest priority. Give a quick greeting or at least make eye contact and gesture to let them know you'll be with them in just a moment. When you do get back to take the order, be sure you note sides, temps and any other modifications or special requests before you leave the table. Also be sure the number of orders matches the number of diners.

Every good supervisor I've ever worked for has instilled in me the credo, "Never go into the kitchen empty-handed." There's always something that needs to be carried to the side station, dishwasher area or bar. A tray can be a server's best friend. Insist that your staff use them — for carrying beverages, condiments, small items like cups of soup, and underliners. Bar trays are also very helpful for clearing the table

once the guests have left. Do be sure, though, that staff doesn't take efficient to the extreme by creating "trash sculptures:" stacks of glasses filled with liquid, utensils, napkins, placemats and the like. That's unattractive, unsanitary, unprofessional and potentially dangerous when glasses stick together.

Many managers frown on bus carts, and I understand their aversion. But if there's an inconspicuous place in a corner of the side station, out of guests' view, they can save a lot of steps, especially in a large dining room. Just be sure to remind your staff that it's dishes to bus tubs, not bus tubs to the table!

Banquet tray service is sometimes appropriate in a restaurant and can cut down on trips to the kitchen. Generally, you can carry many more items than you can by hand. A pizza, the stand, the Parmesan and crushed pepper can all be brought out in one trip; butter, sour cream and chives, or oil and vinegar cruets can be placed on the tray. You can carry three or more plates without juggling them on your arm. Banquet trays (with tray jacks) are also helpful when clearing a table. Of course, you never place used plates on the same tray as fresh food, but if you've completed service at one table you can use that tray to clear another.

Teach your servers the proper way to carry and deliver three plates by hand. Have two servers work a table that has more than eight guests. It's just more efficient. Orders are taken faster and the food can be delivered more quickly. Make sure your staff is using a pivot system to take the order so food isn't "auctioned." Have servers pick up orders — or

& SAVE STEPS

organize them on the tray — in the order they'll be served. Servers waste precious time and steps walking round and round a table to deliver the order.

Use pitchers to refill water and iced tea glasses, and carafes to replenish coffee. Replacing half-finished beverages with fresh ones takes extra steps, increases the risk of breakage and spills, uses more energy, and creates more work for the dishwasher. The exception is to always bring a fresh soda to the guest (although if multiple guests have the same beverages, you also might consider a pitcher of soda and ice).

Use a marking tray so guests always have the utensils required for the next course. When a guest has to ask for a fork or knife because his utensils were cleared with the prior course, it's more work for the server and looks unprofessional.

Hold preshift meetings. Go over the specials so servers don't have to make extra trips to the kitchen to ask about a specific preparation or sauce. The exception, of course, is when a guest tells you that he has an allergy. That has to be checked out with the kitchen. Have an "86" board, so everyone knows, at a glance, what's low or not available.

The hostess can add to efficiency by picking up scattered menus after she's seated guests. She or a manager could save a server a two-minute check back as long as she informs the server of her actions. Communication and teamwork are great time and energy savers. The kitchen can help, too, by putting up complete orders. "Come back for the other two" is not very efficient. A "hold/fire" system can ensure that the next course isn't served until the guests are ready for it. It also helps keep the server on the floor instead of in the kitchen.

Remind your servers to have checks ready for presentation and to think about picking up one table's check at the bar POS when they're picking up cocktails for another table. It's important, though, to be sure guests have ordered everything they want before the check is presented. When a guest requests a dessert or another beer after you've dropped the check, you have to start the process all over again.

For your younger — and video game savvy — servers, you might want to incorporate "Diner Dash" (\$9.95 at playfirst.com or free online play) into your training. The waitress, Flo, seats diners, takes orders, places the orders with the kitchen, serves food, presents checks, busses tables and seats new guests from the ever-lengthening line at the front door. Points are scored — or deducted — based on her prioritizing abilities and efficient service. It's really quite a useful dining room time and task management learning tool.

Observe your staff. You know who your most efficient and productive servers are. Ask them how they save steps. Bring these ideas and your own to the preshift meeting. Learn to manage your time and economize movement in your daily routine and help your service team do the same. **NAC**

David Rothschild is co-owner of EATiQuette, a Phoenix-based waitstaff training company specializing in on-site, certificate training programs for casino food and beverage departments. He can be reached at (602) 569-2051 or David@EATiQuette.com. You can read David's previous Native American Casino articles on EATiQuette.com by using the "articles" link on the home page.