



AUDREY
HEPBURN OR
MADONNA

WHO'S YOUR
HOSTESS?

by David Rothschild

I start my workshop for hosts/hostesses by stating that I believe his/her position is one of the most important in a restaurant. This is usually followed by snickers from the attending supervisory staff. Hostesses get no respect! (Since the majority of greeters/seaters are women, I'll refer to them here as hostesses.)

Phil Vettel, restaurant critic for the *Chicago Tribune* once wrote, "The hostess job is usually given to the most airheaded, least trained of the servers. It should be the opposite."

Think about it: Who has the first contact with the guest? Who has the opportunity to make a good first impression for the restaurant? The hostess, that's who! Do they get any training? Hardly ever. Are they hired for their experience and aptitude? Rarely. And, as if the hostess job weren't already hard enough, the hostess is also the cashier at many tribal casino restaurants.

I've worked with some incredible hostesses over the years. They were *de facto* restaurant managers, dealing with whatever came their way during that shift. Irate guests, complaining servers, overworked bussers — all in a day's work for a top-notch hostess. Combining the grace of a 1940's silver-screen actress, the diplomacy of a statesperson and the compassion and understanding of a Cub Scout den mother, they were the glue that held together some of the great restaurants.

Recently, at a Las Vegas casino restaurant, I was greeted by a young hostess who had just coughed into her hands and was vigorously chewing gum. She was dressed in capris and a short white top that exposed her midriff. I had hoped to have a memorable dining experience, but the evening started off on a wrong note.

Here are some thoughts and tips to help ensure that your host/cashier staff presents a positive, welcoming image of your restaurant while efficiently performing the job:

- The greeting at the door sets the tone for the meal.
- Someone needs to be there at all times, appropriately dressed for the restaurant concept, with a sincere smile and a warm greeting.
- In many operations, the hostess answers the phone and takes reservations. Calls need to be picked up by the third ring, and the person answering should have a "smile" in her voice.
- A hostess needs to remember, though, that the guest standing in front of her always has priority. How many times have you, as a guest, been made to feel that your arrival at the restaurant interrupted the hostess' phone call or conversation with another staff member? Hostess stands are a common gathering place for servers and bussers. Inevitably, one of these staff members will have his back to the arriving guest. Rude, rude, rude. Keep this area clear, tidy and inviting.
- When greeting a guest, confirm the number in the party, ask if they have seating preferences or special needs. If a guest doesn't have a reservation, you still need to make him/her feel welcome and important. When seating guests without reservations, always use a table that has been preset with the

appropriate number of settings, if possible. If adjustments need to be made, remember that it's always easier to remove a setting than to find one to add!

- Walk in front of the guests when you show them to the table. Don't walk too fast. Look back occasionally to make sure the guests are still following you! Point out inclines and steps or possible obstructions that could be a hazard.
- At this point, many hostesses start the sales: "The chef's special is delicious tonight!" or "Save room for the chocolate decadence cake — it's amazing!"
- Choose the best seat for one of the ladies (facing a window or point of interest). Pull out her chair and assist her in being seated. Many restaurants have the hostess hand out menus. Starting with a woman, stand to the left of the guest and present an open menu.
- Inform the service team of a special occasion or any special requests. I also think it's a good idea to follow up with a written reminder the next time through the dining room. Few things make guests angrier than when they call ahead to request something special for a birthday and the service team forgets. As a manager, the calls and letters from unhappy guests due to this kind of oversight is really something I could do without!
- A solo diner should be treated with extra care. A female friend, who regularly eats by herself in casino restaurants, said she's often treated poorly because she's a woman dining alone. Keep in mind, too, that the solo diner could be an advance scout for a future large party.
- Hostesses are sometimes referred to as the "traffic cops" of the dining room. On the way back to their station after seating guests, they should check to see which tables have been vacated and are ready for reseating. Hostesses should rotate guest seating throughout server stations. This helps ensure that guests get the best service the restaurant can provide and some servers don't get swamped by being double-seated while others stand around with nothing to do. Every server should be given an opportunity to make a living. A good hostess keeps track of the number of covers (guests) each server has had. At the end of the evening, this number should be as even as possible.

A hostess needs to be able to do everything a server or busser can do. When guests are breathing down her neck for a table, she needs to be able to clear and reset. She needs to be able to carry a tray of drinks from the bar and know how to service a check. She should be able to answer guests' questions: "The restrooms are down the hall to your left." "The chef has been here for three years. He's originally from New York."

Supervisors: Still think the hostess job is an easy one? Think again. Train your hostesses in all aspects of the job. And if you have some good ones, appreciate, reward and cherish them! **NAC**

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