

# Front-of-House



by David Rothschild

**A**s a restaurant service trainer, I've had many opportunities to talk with food and beverage service teams, F&B managers, training managers and HR directors about hiring, training and service practices in their F&B departments. It becomes more apparent all the time that there's a wide gap between what recruiters and managers perceive and what is reality for those who work in front-of-house. Here are a few examples:

**Myth: Servers want to become managers.**

**Reality:** I've had quite a few jobs in my life. I've been a waiter, salesman, teacher, restaurateur, dining room manager and Maitre d'. If asked to choose my favorite job, I'd have to say waiting tables. I loved waiting tables. I especially enjoyed the interaction with the guests. When a guest would leave my station and the restaurant having had a memorable experience, I felt great. I loved that when my shift was over, it was over. I never took the job home with me. The money was always good.

Most career waiters I know have volleyed between managerial and service positions. I regretted almost every restaurant manager job I was talked into taking. I always ended up having more aggravation and making less money than when I was on the floor. When my daughter was young and I was a restaurant manager, she astutely commented that I was always happier when I was a waiter.

Note to senior management: Hiring managers from

## Myths & Misconceptions

the ranks is rarely the best idea. It's hard enough running a restaurant without having to establish a new identity after working side-by-side with the front-line crew. I've known several newly promoted casino restaurant supervisors and managers who've transferred to other departments because they weren't able to transition into their new roles.

**Myth: Waitstaff should be hired for personality — we can teach them the skills.**

**Reality:** The hiring process for servers never ceases to amaze me. A casino corporate vice president of food and beverage once told me that company policy was to hire servers strictly on personality. Doesn't prior experience or recommendations from former employers count? Not necessarily. Okay, then is subsequent training provided for the novice servers? Not usually. In fact, that VP went so far as to tell me he'd be okay with a guest correcting a waiter's service because it would make the guest feel knowledgeable.

Sure, personality is important. We want our servers to be outgoing, communicative, giving and caring individuals. But when the waitstaff gets formal training, their personalities can shine. If servers are uncomfortable with the rules of dining or service, they can't be comfortable in their jobs. They're too worried about making mistakes. They become more confident when they have skills! This isn't just my opinion. After our workshops, servers have e-commented that they're now more easily able to interact with guests. There seems to be more time because they don't have to concentrate on the mechanics.

As Arizona Diamondbacks Manager Bob Melvin said in a recent *Arizona Republic* article, when speaking of a young position player: "Once it gets comfortable at a certain position, and you get comfortable with what you're doing and have some success, then the real you comes out."

A quiet, shy, young busser at a Tucson casino had really blossomed when we returned to his restaurant several months after training. Not only was he practiced and polished in his service skills, he was talking with the guests and making menu suggestions. He made a point of telling me that he felt more confident because he felt like he knew what he was doing.

**Myth: Trailing equals training.**

**Reality:** A casino human resources director recently told me all of the training for their restaurants was done, "on-the-job." That's not uncommon. Training in most restaurants, casino and otherwise, is still the "buddy system." Shadow an experienced waiter for a few days or, in some cases, a few weeks, and by absorption you will become a server. Never mind that the training server might not be the least bit interested in becoming a mentor. He has his own station to take care of and usually doesn't have the time or inclination to take this role seriously. Hopefully, the newcomer will learn the restaurant systems, where things are located and a variety of procedures. But let's be realistic: Will he learn dining room etiquette? Proper service techniques? Salesmanship? Maybe, maybe not. In addition, the new server is picking up all of the experienced server's bad habits and shortcuts.

Many properties rely on their food and beverage director to do the training for the department. (As if he doesn't already have enough on his plate!) Besides, many of these individuals didn't come up through the front-of-house and don't really have a service background. Even if they do have the knowledge, being able to teach it to others is a whole other matter.

**Myth: There are different levels of service.**

**Reality:** I hear this a lot from non-restaurant people, training directors

and even F&B directors. It's true that expectations for buffet service are not the same as they are at a gourmet restaurant. However (and this is a big however), the basics of service should be the same in all restaurants. Attention to personal hygiene, sanitation and appearance is the same; plate carrying and delivery are the same; clearing and bussing are the same. I could go on and on.

It's important to create a culture of service throughout the casino and standardize service throughout the casino restaurants. Guests should receive quality service wherever they choose to dine. It also gives the restaurant managers greater staffing flexibility, moving servers from one outlet to another more easily. They already know the basic rules of service, and that doesn't vary from room to room.

**Myth: A great server doesn't have to write down an order.**

**Reality:** Many guests buy into this misconception. You hear it after the server has left the table. Diners wager amongst themselves on whether the order will come out correctly. When the food arrives and is correct, they're amazed and impressed. It's like a parlor trick. But it has nothing to do with good service.

Servers: Write down the order! In my experience, when the server makes a point of taking the order without writing it down, he usually has to come back to the table to double-check at least one item. Kind of takes the glow off of the "trick," doesn't it?

More importantly, servers should always help one another. In many restaurants, a food runner carries out the food to the diners. How can someone else deliver the food without an auction: "Who gets the cheeseburger?" Writing the order with the corresponding seat designation (pivot system) lets anyone serve the right guest without asking. And how impressive is that!

**Myth: Service is a dead-end career.**

**Reality:** People are eating out more today than at any other time in history. The potential for advancement in the restaurant industry is enormous. I have a friend who sold liquor to restaurants. He'd shake hands with everyone in front-of-house, from the bartenders to the busboys, and always remembered their names the next time he stopped in for an order. I once told him I really admired him for that. He replied that he'd been around long enough to know that, "Today's busboy is tomorrow's Maitre d'."

If you're an excellent server, you're probably an accomplished salesperson. Car dealerships and insurance agencies are always recruiting restaurant servers. Yes, some servers go into restaurant management (despite what I said before), but they also go into teaching, writing and consulting. The opportunities are endless.

**Myth: People usually return to restaurants because of the good food.**

**Reality:** Nope. All restaurant surveys show that people return to restaurants because of the service they received and the way they were treated. Good service creates return business. Training creates good service. **NAC**

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