

SALESPERSON OR ORDER-TAKER:



I used to be surprised when I'd look at the Sunday classifieds and find car dealerships advertising for sales help in the restaurant/hotel listings. What were they thinking? Why would they target restaurant servers? What do waiters know about sales?

As it turns out, the best servers know quite a bit about sales, even though they don't generally think of themselves as salespeople. The best servers are those who want to maximize the money they make on each shift. Managers know who they are: They're the ones with the highest check averages and the most sales.

These waiters are often a rare commodity, especially at tribal casino restaurants. Why is this? For one thing, casino servers are paid considerably more per hour than their counterparts in the non-casino world. Many whom I've spoken with are perfectly happy with the money they make per shift just for showing up. They don't see the need to make suggestions or to sell product. Servers who make just over \$2 an hour know the importance of gratuities — it's their livelihood.

TIPS, by the way, is an acronym for To Insure Prompt Service. (As a one-time English teacher, I know it should be "Ensure," but so be it.) Tips used to be given to a server at the beginning of the meal. Now, we leave them as we pay our check. Most guests choose to tip based on a percentage of the check. For the longest time, 15 percent was considered an adequate tip for restaurant table service. American Express now finds that its cardholders leave 18 percent, on average. It seems like elementary math to me: The higher the check average, the greater the tip.

As a manager, sharing sales and merchandising techniques with your staff can make a big difference to the bottom line of your restaurant. Your servers will make better tips and your guests will benefit as well. I know when many tribal casinos start up, they have only delis and buffet restaurants. Can the fol-

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lowing techniques be used in these venues? Absolutely.

My wife, Barbara, and I were at a casino quick-service restaurant recently when an enthusiastic, young counterperson really impressed us. She saw that we were undecided about what to order. She asked if we'd considered the daily specials. They were posted, but we hadn't noticed. She described them to us and mentioned that she'd tried one and thought it was terrific. Two sales. Well done!

Many servers are reluctant to make suggestions for fear of appearing pushy and turning off guests. This is a legitimate concern. If a guest thinks a waiter is only trying to line his own pockets, he'll be on guard and not receptive. A conscientious server should be looking out for the best interests of the guests at all times. When making suggestions, the server should be attempting to enhance the guest's dining experience.

As a manager, encourage your waitstaff to become the experts on the restaurant and menu. At pre-shift meetings, have them sample the daily special. Have different servers tell the group how they would describe the item to a guest. Hold menu tastings. It's difficult to describe a product that you haven't tasted. Staff (including your bussers and hostesses) should be quizzed regularly on potential guest questions. The guest is often looking for guidance throughout the meal. Servers need to be confident in their knowledge of the menu and the correct pronunciation of menu items. (A reminder: Never, however, correct a guest's pronunciation!)

An order-taker might ask, "Can I get you something to drink?" A guest will typically order a soft drink or iced tea. A sales-oriented server always makes specific suggestions. "We're offering an outstanding Lyeth Sauvignon Blanc by the glass this evening. Can I interest you in a couple of glasses?" The guest is being offered something he wasn't aware was available.

After the guests have had a few minutes to look over the menu, and unless they know the diners to be regulars, have your servers ask, "Is this your first visit? May I walk you through the menu?" Then they should suggest several starters that they especially like and several entrees that are especially good or popular.

Teach servers to use words that make the food sound

enticing: light, full-bodied, fresh — you get the idea. If the guest is having difficulty deciding, the server can ask, "What are you in the mood for this evening?" Help them to narrow down the choices. "Seafood or beef?" Don't always recommend the most expensive thing on the menu! If a guest orders an entree only, an order-taker might say, "Is that all?" A salesperson would be more likely to ask, "Will there be anything else? Perhaps you'd like to share an appetizer or a salad?"

Dessert is another area where we need to emphasize merchandising and salesmanship. As a manager, make desserts visible to the guests. A dessert tray, cart or display case is much more appealing than a menu description. More times than not, I'm presented a check without any mention of desserts. A server should offer every table the opportunity to order desserts. When guests don't finish their entrees, servers often assume they won't want dessert. You'd be surprised. Tempt them with a shared dessert and see how many takers you'll get.

As a restaurant manager, I've found that a little friendly competition among servers can be fun — and good for business. I like to run two-week contests. Who can sell the most desserts or appetizers? It can easily be tracked on the POS. Sometimes I'd offer small prizes like movie tickets or gift certificates. Most of the time, bragging rights are enough. After the two weeks, make a production of announcing the winner at the pre-shift meeting. It doesn't take long for the servers to see how, with just a little bit of effort, they can increase their check averages and their tips.

Take the time to help your waitstaff become salespeople rather than order-takers. Your guests will appreciate it because they'll be given options they weren't aware were available. You, as a manager, will be pleased because this approach encourages more server interaction with the guests, and we all want to see more of that. Upper-management will see the difference in the room's revenues and in the new confidence exhibited by the staff. The servers will be happy when they total up their tips at the end of the month! **NAC**

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YOUR WAITSTAFF?