

# TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT YOUR RESTAURANT

## F&B

by David Rothschild



Picture courtesy of Mystic Lake Casino.

A mystery shop is a great way to get an impartial look at how your restaurant is doing.

One of the best resort general managers I ever worked with walked the entire property first thing every morning. He'd jot down notes on everything from bushes that needed pruning to room service trays left in the hotel hallways to light bulbs that were out in the lobby. We didn't have e-mail in those days, so when he arrived at his office he'd dash off memos to the department heads of the areas that needed attention.

A friend of mine worked with a GM who would occasionally litter the property with scraps of paper. On the underside of some of the papers was a notice of a few-dollars reward for picking up the litter. He had to discontinue the practice after observing an employee throwing the paper back onto the ground when it wasn't an award winner!

Following the pre-shift meeting and just prior to the guests' arrival, my brother (who was my first Maitre d') would go around the dining room and examine the table settings. If the silverware was spotty, he'd toss it on the floor. When the goblets weren't up to snuff, he'd turn them upside down to indicate that they needed to be changed.

At a casino in Tucson, after new hires have had their initial HR training, they're asked to make daily observa-

tions of the property. The training manager has two flip-chart pages on the wall next to his office. One says, "Good Show," the other, "Bad Show." The new employee is asked to jot down, in marker, when he has caught someone doing something really good or really bad. They are encouraged to be specific, but not to mention names.

As a manager, when you go to work every day in the same restaurant, it's hard to see things with fresh eyes. Many good managers have a checklist they go through when they come on shift. I commend them for this practice. Sometimes it's a good idea to bring in someone new to your property to offer a fresh perspective.

A mystery shop is a great way to get an impartial look at how your restaurant is doing. Most casinos employ a mystery shopping service. Visits are done on a fairly regular basis and are conducted by non-restaurant professionals, from a consumer point of view. They can be very helpful. They give you a snapshot of an individual dining experience.

Before we start our staff training of a restaurant, we like to observe how it's currently operating so we conduct a professional mystery shop. Because we're table service trainers, our shops concentrate on service. Certainly, we comment on food, ambiance and perceived value, but our main focus is on service. We come in a day early, make a reservation, if necessary, then dine anonymously. We discreetly fill out a detailed checklist during dinner and finish later back at our room. The mystery shop helps us to determine which areas need the most time and attention during our training. It also let's us know areas where the staff is already adept and might need only a few suggestions and not a great deal of time spent.

We meet with members of the food and beverage management team before starting the training. Sometimes this includes the GM, F&B director, restaurant manager, and other supervisors. It varies from property to property. We provide copies of our report and go through the checklist with them. We point out concerns, areas of service that need improvement and where training would be beneficial.

At this meeting, we'll ask questions like, "Do you know there's a dirty trash can sitting in the middle of the diner?" Or, "Are you aware that every tablecloth in your restaurant is on upside down?" Usually the meeting is being held in the restaurant under discussion so the managers look around and it's like they're seeing the place for the first time. It's amazing how you get used to things and don't even notice them anymore in your day-to-day management of a restaurant.

### Quiz: How Does Your Restaurant Stack Up?

Are the:


1. servers all dressed the same?
2. servers' uniforms clean and neat, especially the aprons?

3. bar and/or banquet trays clean, top and bottom, and free of graffiti?
4. carpets stained or dirty and in need of shampooing?
5. floors littered with wrappers, straws, etc.?
6. chairs and booth seats in good repair with upholstery free of rips and stains?
7. overhead fan blades clean?
8. light bulbs burned out over the booths?
9. music and lighting appropriate and at the optimum level?
10. flowers fresh and the vase water clear?
11. menus clean and not "dog-eared"?
12. salt and pepper shakers filled to the top and clean to the touch?

If you can honestly say your answers to questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12 are "Yes," and 4, 5 and 8 are "No," congratulations! You're observant, proactive and doing a great job. If you haven't done as well as you would like on this self-test, come up with a plan to continuously monitor and improve your restaurant. One suggestion that I like to make is to have a rotating MOD (manager on duty) program where, once a week during his/her shift, a restaurant manager observes, writes and comments on other on-property restaurants. Another good idea is to encourage your hosts/hostesses to submit, in writing, their observations on what needs adjusting, replacing or repair.


It's not easy to keep a fresh eye in your business, but it is truly worth the effort. This attention to detail is what will set your establishment above the rest in terms of cleanliness, comfort and diner-appeal. **NAC**

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