

# THE SATISFIED CUSTOMER

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**Notes on Restaurant Management  
and Customer Satisfaction from  
the Customer's Perspective**

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*Notes on Restaurant Management and Customer Satisfaction  
from the Customer's Perspective*

## Foreword

There are outstanding courses in hotel and restaurant management at a number of reputable colleges, universities. I expect many of the professional restaurant managers reading this book may have graduated from one or more of these courses. This book is still for you. At school, they taught you the inside mechanics of running a restaurant; this book is about the running of a restaurant from the customer's chair.

I recently heard that it normally takes 10,000 hours of direct experience with something, anything, to "master" it. Since I have been dining out at least three times a week for the last 47 years, I must have accumulated more than 15,000 dining hours of experience, so I certainly must have mastered the fine art of dining out and must have acquired some credibility as an authority on the operation of a restaurant from a customer's point of view.

A story attributed to former president, John F. Kennedy, claims that, during a briefing on a Soviet leader by a highly qualified psychological profiler, Kennedy is said to have stopped the briefing saying something to the effect: "I can't afford to understand [the Soviet leader] better than I do now. If I understand him better, I'll become more sympathetic to his point of view and pull my punches in negotiations..." and dismissed the briefer. In the same vein, I really don't want to know more than I do about restaurant management from the professional's perspective. In the final analysis, it really doesn't matter if this procedure or that is more cost-effective or efficient; if it annoys me as a customer and will affect whether I return for another meal, it is the wrong procedure. And, this is the key to measuring customer satisfaction: return business; customers who come back for more.

This modest book is a collection of notes and thoughts on the operation of a successful restaurant from the customer's perspective. Organized into a logical three-point mantra, the notes provide insights to running a restaurant regardless of the nature of the establishment's cuisine or design philosophy.

I readily acknowledge from the very beginning that restaurant operations deviating from the principles outlined in this book will often succeed in spite of the rules. Success, however, does not invalidate the rule; it just suggests that what the owner is providing otherwise is so good that the customer is willing to overlook a deviation here or there. To paraphrase Ring Lardner: Restaurant success does not always go to the clean, safe, and innovative, but that's the way to bet.

This book has two audiences: the primary audience comprises restaurant owners, operators, and workers. The second audience includes everyone who eats out with any frequency and systematically articulates what diners should expect from a well run establishment.

The first part of the book is aimed at restaurant owners/managers. Part Two is aimed at restaurant staff. The whole of the book targets restaurant patrons.

Great hospitality sales and great dining!

Dan Nickell  
Vienna, VA, 2009

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## Part One

### Introduction

This is a book about customer satisfaction. The principles developed can and should be applied toward many retail operations, but the focus here is about restaurants and food service in America. Since we all have to eat, the concepts should speak to anyone, regardless of occupation.

This work grows out of a recent epiphany: restaurants are not a luxury or an optional artifact of modern, western civilization, but, for some, a necessity, and, for many others, a very good idea, if not absolutely necessary. Eating at one's home is often quicker and frequently cheaper, but not always the smartest or easiest option. In-home cooking requires a significant capital investment in space and equipment. Inattention to these details could result in a significant waste of time and effort, over the long run, in a poorly designed space, or a challenge to good health from cheap, poorly designed or constructed equipment whose open corners and recesses breed life-threatening bacteria. This is not to argue that restaurant dining is a generally healthier alternative; often, it's not, but it has its merits.

To the other extreme, many home kitchens, or parts of them anyway, are models of economic excess with stoves, ovens, refrigerators, freezers, sinks, hot dog cookers, ice cream makers, microwaves, pots, pans, flatware, silverware, and china<sup>1</sup> destined to be ignored and unused in the extreme, or, at least, inefficiently used...not to mention the plethora of various peelers, scrapers, scoops, ladles, spatulas, knives, olive pit removers, jar lid openers...all junked together so tightly in gadget drawers that locating and extracting the proper tool for a particular task requires more time and effort than economically justified by the task at hand.

In brief, to compare the cost of materials to prepare a hot dog or hamburger, with accompaniments and condiments at home, with the somewhat greater cost to purchase and hot dog and beans at a commercial establishment is to ignore the many hidden costs of home ownership and the efficiency of dining out; engendering a false sense of economy.

But, we stray from the central point, customer satisfaction.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm guilty, too. Our family china cabinet includes complete china setting for twelve we have not used since our first anniversary, 20 years ago.

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## The Three Key Dimensions of Customer Satisfaction

The best measurement of customer satisfaction is repeat business. To what extent are your patrons repeat customers? Unless you run a restaurant in Breezewood, PA, if you never see a customer after their first visit, no matter how busy your establishment, you probably have a serious customer satisfaction problem. Why Breezewood, PA? Quoting the Wikipedia article on Breezewood<sup>2</sup>:

“In 1940, Breezewood was designated exit 6 on the just-opened Pennsylvania Turnpike. In the 1960s, Breezewood became the junction of the Turnpike and the new Interstate 70. Later renumbered exit 12, it is now exit 161 on the Turnpike following a change to mileage-based exit numbering.

“A highway funding anomaly gave rise to a gap of less than 1 mile on I-70 that was not built to Interstate Highway standards, featuring traffic lights — one of only two such places on a major Interstate highway in the United States. In road-geek terminology, such a location is known as “breezewood”...According to a June 2004 article in the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, 3.4 million vehicles exited the turnpike through Breezewood in 2003...Within the several block area, a wide variety of family-style restaurants and fast-food outlets are available ... According to a 1990 *New York Times* article, Breezewood offered “no less than 10 motels, 14 fast-food restaurants and 7 fuel and service stations, including two sprawling truck stops...”

I suspect it’s difficult for Breezewood restaurant operators to track repeat customers—all 14 of the fast food places and the several ‘sit-down’ restaurants in the area are almost always very busy, at least, and are often at capacity with passing transients—but a dedication to optimum business revenue<sup>3</sup> suggests that they should worry and find ways to track and optimize repeat business. Of course, many of the visitors will be one-time customers, never to return to Breezewood again. The goal is to maximize the percentage of repeat business from those who do live in the area, or use Breezewood several times a year.

The operative question is: what comprises the keys to customer satisfaction. Having examined my own feelings over the years, and having discussed the issue at length with others, I’ve come to the

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breezewood,\\_Pennsylvania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breezewood,_Pennsylvania)

<sup>3</sup> The central premise of this book is that restaurant owners/managers have a fiduciary responsibility to their shareholders/stakeholders to maximize share value of their establishment(s), even if they (and perhaps their spouses) are the only stakeholders, and one-half of the way to fulfill this responsibility is by maximizing customer satisfaction. The other half is to reduce operating expenses through efficient operations. (These objectives may, at times, conflict.)

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conclusion that customer satisfaction is the consequence of the restaurant owner's attention to three key factors: Safety, Service, and Value.

## **Safety**

Regardless of the establishment's operating theme or ambiance (some themes might try to emphasize adventure or some sort of risk), patrons want to be safe travelling to and visiting the restaurant.

## **Service**

The customer expects timely and efficient service as well as an appropriate ambiance and menu.

## **Value**

The satisfied customer wants value for money paid, regardless of the type of establishment.

## **Exceptions**

There are no real exceptions. Any 'exceptions' must be in keeping with the theme and overall restaurant design. At the same time, there are some extremes in regional dietary customs and materials that are not only challenging to the uninitiated, but sometimes dangerous to persons whose bodies have not built up immunities to bacteria and microbes that give the cuisine its particular taste and appearance. 'Safety' in this context is relative. The restaurant owner is advised to be mindful of those patronizing their establishments.

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## Safety

Many of us love to ride roller coasters and yell with fear, but that doesn't mean we really want to experience the risks or dangers the ride's advertising suggests. It's the same with restaurants. The theme of a restaurant may be a medieval joust or a pirate's cave, but that does not mean the customer is ready to be skewered by a jousting lance, poisoned by a rotten apple, or severed with a real saber. There are three main components to the Safety dimension: Security, Sanitation, and Safety.

## Security

*Security* refers to protection of the customer's person and property from injury, damage, or theft from criminals or vandals while approaching, parking at, or departing the restaurant venue. In some instances, the allure of a restaurant may be the perception of a 'dangerous' environment. Owners establish a restaurant in truly dangerous neighborhoods at their peril, not only because of the inherent threats to their own staff and property, but to the wellbeing of their patrons and the impact of an adverse event on the patron's level of satisfaction with their experience at that venue.

In those instances in which other business factors persuade an owner to establish a restaurant in an unsavory neighborhood nonetheless, then it's beholden on that owner to ensure that prudent and necessary protective measures are installed to preclude realization of any threats of theft or violence. This may include valet parking (in a secure parking area), low-profile guards, appropriate lighting, and so on. It may also have to include a protected path if necessary to prevent unfortunate incidents.

## Sanitation

Patrons expect sanitary conditions in spite of any willingness to accept a pseudo-dangerous ambiance. Although many jurisdictions have legislated statutes and rules mandating specific sanitation standards and, to varying degrees of enforcement, as well as periodic inspections to ensure compliance with those standards, owners and staff should all be alert for any unsanitary condition, regardless of local rules or statutes. Schools of hospitality management and local health inspectors will certainly attend to the question of sanitary conditions in kitchens and food storage areas. The question is whether they are equally attentive to the issue of maintaining sanitary conditions in restrooms, and other, non-food-preparation areas of the establishment?

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There are several housekeeping issues that fall into the sanitation arena.

### *Restroom Doors*

When I enter a restroom, I am going to a process in which I expect my hands to become unsanitary, but I normally only have to push on the door—with my elbow if I want—as it swings inward to enter. In a small number of cases, it doesn't bother me if I have to pull on a handle others touch to get in, my hands are going to become unclean in any event. On the other hand, when I have finished my business and washed my hands and I'm leaving the restroom, I often—seems like more than 90% of the time—have to pull on a door handle or door knob to open the door to get out. Often, another person will depart the restroom without washing their hands; using the same handle or knob I have to touch to get out. I would much rather be able to simply push the door open with my elbow than to be forced to touch a handle and pull to get out of the room. Thoughtful owners will plan restroom doors with this activity in mind.

### *Tabletops and Flatware*

Please do not allow your staff to wipe flatware they are about to place on the table with the same cloth they have just used to wipe the seats of chairs or booth seats. Do not allow them to place flatware on those seats, wiped or not. Without going into unnecessary graphical detail, the likelihood of the unsanitary transfer of bodily fluids from the backsides of patrons to the chair surfaces is something I don't want to see continued by wiping those fluids from the seat and onto the surface of flatware or tabletops. Sweat, even from otherwise healthy people, commonly follows a path of least resistance down and over parts of one's backside that never see the light of day.

What, then, do we expect from unhealthy patrons, especially those with some sort of temporary incontinence from gastric distress? Damp spots they leave behind must be veritable swamps of microscopic flora and fauna one does not want to see in a Petri dish, let alone being wiped up with the same cloth that's used an instant later to wipe flatware or tabletops.

One evening, after an otherwise pleasant meal in a Chinese restaurant in Ocean City, MD, I watched in horror as the bus person proceeded to wipe chair seats with the same cloth she then used to wipe table tops AND polish up flatware. It was too much to bear. I called for the manager to point out the unacceptable wiping. To my great

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disappointment, she just shrugged her shoulders and said: “If you don’t like that, you really wouldn’t want to see what goes on in the kitchen...” and I “...should get a life” and walked away. Needless to say, we are not one of her repeat customers and we were definitely not satisfied.

## *Normal Sanitary Practices*

Naturally, I expect to see common application of personal sanitary practices, but I’m often disappointed to witness the honoring of these rules in the breach. What am I to think of the level of sanitation in the kitchen when I see poorly maintained and ill-cleaned restrooms and staff exiting restrooms without washing their hands? When I return to my table to order, after seeing such horrors, I look for and order those foods that are fully cooked and not handled by bare hands between cooking and delivery to my table.

## *Safe*

This is not redundant with Secure and Sanitary; rather, it refers to all the other features of a restaurant that could, if unattended, lead to injury to people or damage to clothing. I don’t want my children hurt on sharp corners or torn, jagged metal. I don’t want my date to tear her expensive dress or get a painful splinter on broken pieces of wood. Instead, I expect both management and staff to be on constant alert for these safety hazards.

“Rainforest Cafe” restaurants, for example, are designed on a jungle theme with thunder and lightning special effects, steam simulating a post-heavy rainfall fog, and simulated 12 foot crocodiles. Sound and effective management ensures, however, that the sound level of the thunder never exceeds a safe and tolerable level, that the fog doesn’t reach or linger too long on food surfaces, and that the crocodile’s teeth won’t pinch or puncture toddlers’ tiny fingers.

## *Service*

The second leg of the customer satisfaction stool, in my rubric, comprises three basic aspects: ambiance, services, and menu.

### *Ambiance*

Ambiance includes almost everything that isn’t basic building structure or cookware. It is the air, decorations, wall hangings, ceiling hangings, music, entertainment,...

- Ambiance
- Service
- Menu

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## Value

- Food
- Service

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## Exceptions

My comments relate to the center of the dining public, not the extremes. One of the key customer values is Safety. A small portion of the public actually relishes and looks for danger in dining, but, personally, I think most of these people are much like those who look for the scariest rides at the county fair or who go rock climbing. In the back of their minds, they know that the law requires the rides to be fundamentally safe, even though they give every appearance of danger. Only those bent on suicide would actually eat a food, mount a bad ride, or tackle the underside of an overhang when they know it will kill them, but some, like those who eat a raw puffer fish as sushi, when they know it could kill them. It's a subtle but very important difference that validates the principle of safety as a leg of customer satisfaction. "Safety," in the context of this work, doesn't mean the dining experience won't kill the diner; it's just that death or serious illness is not a guaranteed consequence. Short of this, "safety" is a relative construct.

The perspective of this book is mono-regional. That is, it assumes that customers are from the same geographic region as the restaurant and their digestive systems have become harmonized with the materials used in the kitchen. In some regions of the world, native materials will include microscopic flora and fauna to which the natives have become acclimated, but which would prove potentially lethal to the outsider. If your clientele is beginning to include those from distant countries, be mindful of the potential harm local microbes might pose for these visitors and alert them to the perils.

- PF Chang's music.
- Not going to win them all (ignorant, uninformed, crazy...)

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## Part Two: Restaurant Staff

### Tips and Tipping

#### Tips and Tipping

- The basics
  - The right order in the right seq. synced w/all dinners
  - tip or no tipping allowed, cust. pays your salary
  - do the math...a good waiter in a good rest. can make \$125-150k/yr
  - don't do buffets
  - like cab ride, the tip starts at the sec. cust. walks in & is based on total exper.
  - Assume tip will be no more than 20% and drops w/ea blunder, recovers w/ea thoughtfulness
  - the tip is based on meeting cust expectations, not on how hard you can make the cust think you are working -- slow down, focus on that cust--don't let them so u sweat..."we're sooo busy today
  - if you ask a question-make it sound like you really care about the answer
  - let the cust catch your eye...
  - ...but be discrete, not pesky
  - finally, not every cust is hvy tipper, but that's the way to play
- Seating and Serving
  - Seating: 1-2 will be seated in worse tables than 3+. Tips will be larger at nicer tables. Avoid getting assigned bad location tables
  - Serving: It's maddening to place a specific order with the wait person only to have someone else from the kitchen serve the table and not have a clue re special orders
    - Repeat or acknowledge the order
    - Speak 'Subway'
    - Work efficiently, min. trips-but...don't try to overload
    - Work nights vs. days...menu often higher, clients more play less work
    - No cheese, please
    - Wine will add \$3-12 to any tip
    - Check the before u deliver: correct, prepared, attractive?
    - things you control vs. things you need to worry about
      - (warm wine glasses, warm salad plates, cold things that should be hot)
    - Role: order taker vs. marketer?
    - NO MATTER HOW BUSY YOU ARE
    - Recommendations...realtor analogy

## Part Three: To the Restaurant Patron Reading this Book

This book is written for those who own or are responsible for managing restaurants. Its secondary market is those who work in restaurants so they can better appreciate the owner's responsibilities and find their place as part of an integrated system. If you don't own or manage a restaurant or work in one, you've had a free look behind the scenes.

Nonetheless, it is important, now that you're here and you know how important you are to the owner, to understand your role and responsibilities as a customer. Now that you know that the customer is king and the owner should move heaven and earth to reinforce that feeling in the customer, your role is to recognize the noblese oblige—the obligation of nobility to mind your manners and not be jerk. In studying military leadership, I came upon some advice that a subordinate never forgets that the officer is an officer, but that the officer never mentions it. Yes, you are vital to the success of the restaurant, but it is nothing but unacceptably rude (at least in most western, democratic nations) to take advantage of this position and abuse the help one way or the other.

See Part Two, the section on Tipping. When I was a much younger lad, a 10% was a very good tip. Today, 15%-18% sends the same message, but I am beginning to sense a trend toward 20% being more of the norm than a particular compliment...in the United States and a number of other countries. In many countries, tipping is either unheard of or included in the bill in which case any money left on the table is unnecessary. The polite traveler studies the books (or Googles the answer, being led to [www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A640018](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A640018) as an excellent resource) and learns (and observes) the regional expectations or customs.

Good dining is like a well-rehearsed dance. Everyone knows their place and what to expect from their partners. This book, except for the absent pointers for the kitchen and what the chef should do (watch televised episodes of Gordon Ramsey for one approach to kitchen management) outlines the role of restaurant management and staff. You, the customer, are expected to know your role and play it well. Nowhere in your playbook are any dispensations for rudeness or unwarranted ignorance.

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It's quite alright to visit a new restaurant offering a totally unfamiliar cuisine for which you have no knowledge. But, having taken that plunge, it's your obligation to let the manager or assigned wait staff know about your ignorance and your need for help deciding what to order. A well-run establishment will demonstrate its great delight to accommodate you and make your first dining experience a memorable event offering nothing too extreme or unfamiliar while not being patronizing. When in doubt, however, ask.