

Besting the Guest from Hell - By Steven Ferry

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'You call this a five star-hotel? I've been in Motel 6's that provided better service. You people are all the same, slipping service standards and all you are interested in is tips. It's freezing in here, the A/C doesn't work, the bed's too small, the place stinks, I've been kept waiting by room service again, although why I bother eating here I don't know, the food tastes atrocious, everybody says so. Get me the manager!'

Not your favorite type of guest. They come, they complain about everything, and when it comes to checking out, they complain some more and loudly until the alarmed manager perhaps comps their stay. Sometimes they set up the employees to fail, such as happened once when a guest ordered breakfast from the butlers whom I was training at a newly opened hotel, and also from room service. He requested different items for different times. When the butlers and room service independently delivered the requested items at the requested time, the guest complained they were early/late and had forgotten items. This upset the employees initially until they compared notes. At checkout, the guest listed these and myriad similar 'failings' and demanded the entire week's stay for himself and entourage in the Presidential Suite be comped.

Yes, one can blacklist such people, but what about those who then call in under a false name, or have someone else do so? And what about this being the first time such a character and his/her entourage comes to your hotel-as happened with the gentleman mentioned above? Once he had gone, a quick check with two large chains found him blacklisted.

In defense, does one create a national database of blacklisted guests? Butlers in London used to have their little black book with information on 'employers to be avoided.' Word of mouth still exists in the butler community along this line. But in the larger hospitality profession, apart from in-house blacklists, any national database would be suicidal in our litigious society.

So what is a hotel to do with the guest from hell, whether they go the whole way and demand to be comp'd, or just create havoc for one and all during their stay? It seems we must suffer them with smiles on our faces and daggers in our hearts. Except that just results in personal anguish for all employees touched by such people, financial loss for employees and the hotel, as well as reduced service for other guests, as employees are sucked into trying to keep the antisocial guests 'happy' and mute their disturbances.

After centuries of serving often cantankerous employers, the British butler, working with a modern understanding of the mind, has something to offer in answer to this question, as you will discover in Besting the Guest from Hell.

Besting The Guest From Hell

The basic answer to the guest from hell is to focus on educating employees on this kind of personality and then letting them have fun predicting what the guest will do or say next. When employees recognize the characteristics in a guest, they also know why they behave as they do, see them for what they are, and can predict how they will behave. Employees no longer think 'mea culpa' and 'mea lose my job' when assailed by such guests. One sees through the intensely mean-spirited and unjust smokescreen and confusion to a miserable individual whose only ability to create an effect has been reduced to upsetting others.

With such an understanding, one can still provide the smiling service expected of one, but without the dagger in one's heart. For violence, expressed or unexpressed, only exists in the absence of understanding. The analogy I like to draw is the martial art of Aikido. The basic principle is not to resist or try to stop the antagonist's motion, but to redirect it. In other words, one does not present a target for the opponent to connect with.

By empowering employees, one un-empowers the antisocial guests, for the only power these actually have is that generated by the employee in responding to the unjust and unkind remarks. An individual in a lunatic asylum thinking he is Jesus has no followers outside the asylum. He has no power. But if people outside the asylum give weight to his words and form a cult, then he would have power. It's the same with the guest from hell. Recognize his or her ravings as those of a lunatic who has yet to be labeled as one (and may never be, because in real life such people can sound very convincing and may even have numerous letters after their name, titles in front of it, and great wealth), and he will have no power. React or give credence to his claims, and one empowers him.

That's the philosophy part. What about the application?

The inescapable truth is that such people are completely incapable of telling the truth. The angry, noisy type will at best twist the truth to make their point more egregious, or at worst, blatantly lie in a manner that is most destructive to the target of their ire. Those who are too timid to be angry, sometimes known as 'passive aggressive' or 'covertly hostile,' will be most ingenious in their complete perversions of the truth, covering their tracks with great finesse.

The only thing an employee can do wrong is to believe anything such people say. The only correct way to deal with the information such people give is to start from the premise that whatever they just said is not true. This is particularly important when dealing with irate or covertly hostile guests for managers who might feel inclined to act against employees based on the guest's utterances.

To be sure, employees can mess up, and some guests, even those who are not normally vicious, can react angrily or repress their anger into covertly hostile statements. The manager's job is still to discern the truth, and the fact is that any statement expressed in anger or covert hostility by any guest, will find the truth being twisted or completely falsified.

So how does one recognize such guests? The angry ones are not hard to recognize, although they may be unpleasant to confront. It is the ones who smile while stabbing you in the back, either with some statement that makes less of you in some way or talking derogatorily about you behind your back, who are more difficult to nail down. This is the schemer who, if called on his real activities, will insist you are misunderstanding her or being overly sensitive, etc.

Apart from their general attitude affecting their ability to tell the truth, other warning signs include the following:

a. They utter upsets or bad news as generalized statements: 'Everybody knows service is poor here,' 'They've all been saying your housekeepers are illiterate.' If you were to ask who 'they' are or 'everybody' is, you'd find out it was just one person, probably expressing some similarly vague statement or some issue that applied to a completely different area.

b. They only ever talk about how bad things are, always putting a negative spin on events or communications they are relaying. When another person says, 'This steak is a bit overcooked,' the guest from hell can be guaranteed to relay this to other guests, employees, and management as 'The chef should be fired, he doesn't have the first idea how to cook. His meats are all hopelessly dry.'

c. They compulsively criticize and make less of others, their abilities, possessions, activities, looks, etc. With the covertly hostile, this will come across as 'My what wonderful furnishings (smiling). Honey, didn't EconoLodge have the exact same motif?'

(Not to insult EconoLodge or Motel 6, which are perfectly good chains catering well to their specific publics, but I think you understand my intent here).

d. If they are upset with someone or something else (such as at their work or in their family), they'll take it out on housekeeping or the valets or... (wrong target).

e. They do not believe that anyone owns anything, so they'll be the ones who damage fixtures and take everything not actually nailed down in their suite.

f. They will never admit to any wrong doing, and will poo-poo any harm done to others as their being too fussy, thin-skinned, deserving it, etc. On the other hand, the slightest thing done wrong to the guest from hell will be made into an unforgivable wrong that can never be righted.

Ever met anyone like this? They are hard to spot because they are hard to face up to, and the way they behave is designed to throw people off. There are other ways to recognize such people, but the above noticed early in a guest's stay will be good clues that trouble is a-brewing.

That's the time to a) alert all employees dealing with them that a guest has dropped in from hell, and b) have each, while still providing superlative service, note in writing each and every instance of chicanery. There are all sorts of language and communication skills that can be employed to handle even these guests smoothly, based on techniques and attitudes developed in part over the centuries by butlers.

Most importantly, being forewarned and on the lookout for nefarious behavior will put the employees in the driver's seat in handling the situation, rather than just becoming upset over the guest's actions. Secondly, if they hand these reports in to supervisors or the Rooms Manager (who can do additional research with other hotel chains), he or she can prepare a report in time for that guest's checkout. Then if the guest demands to be comp'd or partially comp'd, you are ready for them. And if they come back later with trouble, such as legal suits, demands for redress, complaints to Head Office, then you just yawn, dig out and send off the report with a cover note.

Had the GM of the hotel that comped the Presidential Suite for a week, confronted the gentleman (security in attendance) with the documentation of his exact actions (which in his case included smoking persistently in the no-smoking suite despite repeated requests not to, necessitating a hefty cleaning bill for the hotel), and his history of criminal actions at other hotels, the guest would have backed down, said it was all a misunderstanding, and never had the gall to show his face at that hotel again. Or he might have blustered with legal threats and in all probability taken it no further.

Which brings us to one last point of philosophy: what drives these people? Without becoming too technical, they have no self respect, they do not feel they can produce decent and admired effects (what most of us are happy to and strive to do), or indeed produce anything at all. In other words, they are parasites. They consider their positions in society weak as a result, and so their constant effort is to weaken and undermine others, in the expectation that their own position will be less weak as a result. They are actually criminals, whether the law has caught up with them or not.

So, don't let them intimidate or frighten you into cooperating in their criminal ways. Doing so will only compromise and degrade your view of mankind, from which the majority of your well meaning guests hail (come).

Nothing I am proposing is meant to imply that one does not seek in every way to provide superlative service to every guest. Just do it with your eyes open, paperwork in place, and a healthy dose of ethics and probity (moral correctness) if a guest from hell tries his or her ways on you or your fellow employees!

If any of this is not clear or needs amplification, feel free to write.

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