

Muzzling the Guest From Hell - By Steven Ferry

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If response to an article is anything to go by, the recent one about Besting the Guest from Hell hit the spot for a number of readers.

Who hasn't had a run-in with a guest from hell and, following the dictum, 'The Guest is Always Right (even when they are acting criminally and anti-socially),' have taken it on the chin, turned the other cheek, and dare I say it, bent over-and in so doing, also exposed their sense of what is right and just to a good drubbing. After which, invariably, there is the giving away of the farm to appease the guest; huge amounts of angst about possible repercussions from head office, the media, and whatever other sources of retribution the guest promised to inform of one's misguided efforts at service; and a lessening of one's liking for the job, eventually to the point of quitting the profession.

It is essential that the hospitality industry preserve the 'hospitality' in its approach to guests; guests from hell undermine the openness and good humor upon which such hospitality depends. Yet this 'Besting the Guest from Hell' article is reportedly the first to espouse skewering such guests in order to protect that usually sacrosanct bottom line and that otherwise-well-nurtured employee morale.

Read on to discover exactly how we can take this old 'bull' by the horns and deliver the coup de grace.

Muzzling the Guest From Hell

Consider momentarily two of the responses received to 'Besting the Guest from Hell'

'I had the misery of dealing with such a guest when I was the GM for (named) Hotel. Sadly, this cretin called the corporate offices and lied and slandered me ruthlessly. I had worked with that company for four years, increasing occupancy and profits. Yet, this one creature, behaving similarly to the Presidential Suite creep in your article spouted off about legal action and my tenure quickly changed into being micromanaged. Needless to say, I resigned within a year. It seemed his celebrity superseded anything I had done. I did tell everyone in my city and chain about his behavior and we were protected from his ilk. I believe your bad guest list is a wonderful idea. I hope it takes hold. I thank you. It is rare that I respond to an article, I felt yours required positive feedback.'

'Thank you for telling the truth-such a rare thing now-and addressing a topic near and dear to many service people's heart. Although no longer employed in the Hotel/Restaurant business, my eighteen-plus years in the business, unfortunately, left me with more memories and stories of the bad guest than the good. Throughout my time in the business, I compiled these stories in my head and contemplated my first book, to be titled 'The Customer is Not Always Right.' Without ranting on with these stories, but sticking to my intention of giving you good feedback for your article, my one comment would be that the select few who behave this way do it because they have consistently gotten away with this behavior. When managers empower employees to treat these people correctly, and their success rate goes down, maybe they will learn that far more is achieved with honey.'

Without wanting to undermine application of the dictum, 'The customer is always right'-invaluable in gracefully resolving genuine customer complaints from guests who are merely poorly served, cantankerous, or difficult...even if they do often embellish their complaints with hyperbole for effect-I feel the time is ripe for a counterattack on those whose intent is not to right a wrong but who make a habit of trying to obtain something for nothing.

For such is the definition of a criminal, whether bopping one on the head and running off with one's wallet; 'making' vast fortunes through hedge funds and other manipulations of virtual money at the expense of the actual, physical economy; or hopping from one hotel to another without exchanging the valuables required to pay the wages and bills. It does not matter how many platinum cards guests carry or tailored suits they wear: if their intent and activity is to maneuver for a free ride by manufacturing complaints out of whole cloth instead of enjoying good service delivered in good faith, then they are criminals.

So what to do? Well, it's time we applied some good old hospitality technology to what is probably an age-old problem. 'Besting the Guest From Hell' recommended adopting the Butler's traditional 'Black Book' of employer misdeeds and character issues. We would upgrade this tool, a hard-backed book filled in with a stubby pencil or quill pen, to a 21st Century Web-based databank solution administered by one or two individuals. Having the same general purpose as a sexual offender list, the Hospitality Black Book would differ in that the list would not be open to the general public or even anyone in the hospitality industry, but only be accessible by the administrators, with oversight by an industry board of advisors. Said information on egregiously offending guests to be solely in the form of facts: date and time of criminal acts; location; exact specifics on what the guest said or did without any opinions or conjecture thrown in; the outcome of the guest's actions; and a sworn attest from the person(s) making each report.

The administrators would be sworn never to divulge the information, but only to answer any queries from any member hospitality company as to whether an individual has been placed in it. The administrators would collect any new reports on new or old names on the list and would be charged only with ensuring that the information in it is factual before filing it. These administrators would receive a small sum of money from hotels to cover their costs of administering the list (given the number of hospitality venues in the world, the sum could be as little as \$5 per hotel).

In the event a guest surmises he is on the list (from the continued refusal by hotels to accommodate him or her), he would have recourse to an independent committee of evidence (made up of four independent hospitality industry and public figures), which would show the reports to the party, get his or her side of the story, and make its findings, including proposing what the guest would need to do to make up the damage to the hotels submitting the complaints (i.e. refunding the comps, public apologies, etc.) and thus allow the guest to clear his or her name. This provision is mentioned only for the occasional time a guest with a genuine complaint has been incorrectly included on the list. Factually, the names on the list will be serial abusers with no slightest concept they have ever done anything wrong and so incapable of reforming.

The above would be the administrative set-up and easy to institute, given software programs, Internet, and Paypal.

While this independent body is being established by whoever wants to step in and set it up, a campaign needs to be run in the industry to identify such guests from hell, provide the parameters for their recognition and the rules of engagement/disengagement, including the meticulous keeping of notes as soon as one has identified a guest as being from hell.

If one has not been able to identify such a guest before his or her arrival and thus been unable to steer them away from one's facility, one can still check with the independent body the moment a guest seems to show his or her true colors. Thus confirmed, employees would be instructed to keep the notes that will later be submitted to the independent body; as well as have the GM present to the guest who, upon checking out, will be trying to deliver his coup de grace with a demand for a comped stay or heavy discount because of all the 'bad service' received.

It might help to educate guests from hell that their number is up. The simplest way to freeze them in the headlights is to produce a popular level book (as suggested by the reader above) and let the media get their hands on it. This book would detail some of the more egregious and wild examples of the activities of guests from hell while sewing examples throughout of how they were eventually brought to justice. The existence of such a book would put such guests on notice and may well cause some of them to tone down their activities. It would certainly empower employees with the knowledge that their nemesis has been caught squarely in the headlights-their criminal behavior acknowledged as unacceptable, and the mechanism existing for dealing with it.

It is only when one cannot do something, anything, about evil individuals, that they can give one the blues and blunt one's desire to serve. So when there is some way to fight back, there is no need for employees to sink into a funk, or for the hospitality industry to feel skittish about employees and the bottom line being assailed by the ill-willed. Morale and income can only improve as a result, if only because, as one head butler indicated after reading the original article on the subject, the amount of money his resort would save in egregious comps as a result of curtailing the activities of guests from hell, would be significant.

To start the ball rolling on the campaign, please send in the horror stories of your experience(s) with guests from hell. Doing so may well prove a catharsis of sorts, as well as enabling this long-needed counterattack. Final publication will not include your or any guest or hotels names, only your initials. Language and grammar will be cleaned up, so do not feel shy if your writing skills may be wanting.

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