

So How Was Your Butler? - By Steven Ferry

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Ratings Keep Hotels Honest & Validates Serious Players

Where butler departments are established properly, they enjoy varying degrees of success based on their adherence to the basic purpose of butling: the providing of a discreet service that anticipates guest needs.

Failed butler departments are caused by violating a few basics: not selecting proven service professionals for butlers; not training them on the persona, mindset, communication skills, and service skills of the butler in a hospitality setting; launching the butler program without bringing the rest of the employees aboard, so it appears as a threat to their income stream; and trying to cut costs by cutting service, resulting in harried butlers providing an irreducible minimum of service to too many guests.

What drives these shortcuts? In my experience, it has been one or more of three distinct impulses:

A) Money motivation, where the goal is solely to increase revenue by riding on the coattails of the butler profession, with little patience for or interest in the financial outlay, sweat equity, and intelligent thinking necessary to deliver the actual service.

B) A manager either not understanding or taking a personal dislike to the idea of butlers. In one instance, an inexperienced and unethical GM was busy accepting personal favors, protecting his incompetent protégés, and creating a culture that put loyalty to his own agenda ahead of servicing guests. He resented being shown up by the service expectations of the popular Head Butler and the butler team. So the GM did everything possible, both covert and brazen, to undermine and end the butler service so desired by the hotel owner and guests. As the Head Butler at this establishment noted with typical understatement, 'GMs unfamiliar with the service would do well to respect the advice of their Head Butler. If one has not worked with butlers before and does not understand the concept fully, it will be very difficult to provide the support/level of understanding required to make the program a success. Instituting a butler department is a project that requires dedication and support on all fronts-ownership, management, and operations-in order to succeed.' This story is still playing out, but the Head Butler is standing firm while taking over increasingly the functions of other departments being mismanaged by the GM that had been cutting across the ability of the butlers and the hotel to service the guests.

C) A manager focused on slashing costs. In one instance, an owner had invested heavily in establishing a butler department (on one floor of a brand new facility) that proved very popular with guests and media (almost always the case). Yet when the revenue began to flag facility wide after the grand opening (as a result of inadequate sales and marketing), he thought one solution lay in the savings that could be accomplished by firing all the butlers, and proceeded to do so. The hotel continues to flounder to this day, having lost its signature service and earned itself a poor reputation in the local community upon which it depended for its personnel, all on top of the original inadequate sales and marketing efforts which were not remedied by these firings.

Successful outcomes might include The Cloister, recently rebuilt and reopened on Sea Island, Georgia. Butler service was initiated at the behest of the owner, Bill Jones III, to all 125-guest rooms and 32 suites. Fiona Williams Cameron, the Head Butler who led the team that established the 55-person butler department, offers some pointers for the kind of success that led to a Four Butler facility with Five Butler service to its 32 suites.

'The more input you can have before infrastructure is in place, the better off you will be in terms of avoiding potential operational issues for the staff, leading to better service for the guests. In terms of operational issues, it is only normal that various departments will be uncomfortable with a new concept, so communication is key among department heads. Lastly, we invested in a large amount of training for the staff and will continue to do so.

'The Hotel Butler Rating System is a wonderful benchmark that will help guide hotels in the direction of this personalized and quality service while also keeping competition alive. Achieving these standards is mainly dependent on training in the modern style. As an example, we have worked to find a happy medium between 'good service' as 'discreet service' and the warm, friendly service characteristic of Southern Hospitality that our guests are used to receiving.'

Leopoldo Perez is the head butler at One & Only Palmilla, voted best resort in Latin America by Conde Naste for the last two years. Butler service to each of the 172 rooms and suites has been a key element in this success. A dozen of these suites receive dedicated butler service, making One & Only Palmilla both a Four- and Five-Butler facility. According to Perez, 'All guests in suites with dedicated butlers are given cell phones for direct contact with their butlers (and nobody else). There is very little the butlers cannot do for guests, as long as it is legal, of course.

'Critical elements in building our butler department have been, firstly, having a trainer to guide the department in the right direction. Secondly, having management support and understanding of what the butler department brings to the property, so they were willing to invest in resources, staff, and training.

'Our guests were not used to butler service at first, especially in a relaxed beach-resort property such as ours, so they did not take advantage of our service and were not commenting on us in customer-feedback surveys. So we created new procedures and amenities, advertised on the Web site and collateral, and increased our staff numbers. The guests then began to notice and use the butlers, thinking of them as 'my butler.' We now enjoy 60% repeat guests and 20% of these ask for the same butler.

We have doubled the number of butlers to 44 because of the demand for butler service.

'The physical layout of our property is not the normal monolithic building with suites easily reached by butlers on each floor. Our 172 rooms are in twelve separate buildings spread over 25 acres, which makes it difficult operationally to provide butler service. We have handled this by assigning rooms optimally and increasing staff numbers. We also set up mini pantries in each building so the butlers have easy access to their tools and supplies, instead of trekking to the two main pantries on site. And we have added butler runners to keep the pantries and mini pantries stocked and to take needed or requested items to the butlers for presentation to the guests.

'My advice to other head butlers is that even if you are already experienced, bring in a professional in the field to help launch the service. Secondly, if the hotel has not yet been constructed, you as head butler need to speak to the architect about designing the spaces and areas needed by butlers to service guests. Thirdly, you need to create your network, attend butler conventions, become a member of professional associations such as the International Institute of Modern Butlers, and use the network of individuals in the profession to give you knowledge and guidance. That's how it has worked for me.

'From the GM's perspective, it is very important that you understand what a butler is and decide what you want your butler service to do for the hotel before launch; then sit down with the head butler and communicate your expectations.

'The rating system has proven very useful. Many hotels are advertising that they have butler service as the next great thing in personalized and excellent service. Many guests are experiencing this butler service, often in hotels where they may not have the necessary resources to provide butler service or the proper training. So guests tend to be disappointed with their experience, which of course reflects on all hotels offering butler service. The ratings will allow guests to know what kind of butler service they will be receiving. In the same way, it gives hotels such as ours that offer butler service, the opportunity to see where they stand with regard to that service, and what they need to do to take it to remain at the same or move to the next level.'

George Sotello is the GM at One & Only Palmilla, and he reports, 'The butler department has become an icon for the resort. Well-traveled guests know what to expect from their butler experience and feedback has been extremely positive. From the moment the guests meet their butler, there is an immediate connection, the guests understanding that they can call upon their butler to fulfill their every need. Some guests, coming from North America where butler service is not common, do not know what to expect from their butlers. We are working on an orientation CD to send first-time guests before they arrive. 'Blow away the customer' is our credo, and we rely on the butlers in a good part to deliver on that promise. We have had many guests contact the resort after leaving, stating that after experiencing the butler service at the resort, they feel lost and wish they could have a butler at home.'

Mr. Nakano, the Managing Director of the Rosewood property, Hotel Seiyo Ginza in Tokyo, has also utilized the Butler Ratings to help extend the butler service model across many guest contact points in the hotel, in addition to providing butler service to all guests-a first for Japan. As Mr. Nakano puts it, 'No-one seems to realize how profitable butler service can be: it would be of great benefit to organizations considering implementing butler service to be coached on how it could enhance the organization's ability to make more money and perhaps save costs through re-organization and consolidation. Our Rooms Division, for instance, is run by the Head Butler; his team of butlers also manages our PABX/Communication Center for all incoming calls to the hotel in addition to all Room Service orders and delivery. We have thereby eliminated the need for a separate PABX and Room Service department and staff. Few people appreciate how valuable and convenient butler service can be.'

Obviously, these benefits accrue where the players are serious about putting a real butler department in place, and a useful tool in achieving this is the Butler Rating System.

Rating Your Butler

For those hotels and resorts offering butler service, and the ratings assigned to them, visit <http://www.modernbutlers.com/html/butler-rating-system.html>. This list is influenced by input from anyone qualified (i.e. anyone who works/worked at or has visited the facility upon which they are commenting) providing their feedback via a link on the same page.

Specific comments are not posted, but are used in assessing the real-time state of butler service-rather than annually as with other rating bodies. The Institute, likewise, does not take a passive/judgmental role, but works with hotels to alert them to issues so they can respond and/or act to improve.

The ratings range from 'No Butler' to 'Five Butlers' (briefly) as follows:

No Butler

The butlers are called such, but have no training or understanding of the nature or skill-sets of a butler, often having a modifier in front of their title, such as 'fireplace butler,' 'technology butler,' or 'baby butler.'

One Butler

There is literally one butler on the floor, rushing to service guests who are kept waiting or improperly serviced. There may be more than one butler, but training on the skills of the butler or the grace of a butler are lacking, even though some of the service is being provided.

Two Butlers

The butler-to-guest ratio is still too strained, so guests are kept waiting or not fully serviced, but basic elements of butler service are performed and the butlers have been trained in their profession either in schools or on site. No night butler on duty and no butler coordinators to connect guests with butlers.

Three Butlers

There are enough butlers in shifts to manage guests, including night butlers, butler coordinators, and a head butler. The Butler department exists as its own department, not under Housekeeping, Concierge, Room Service, F&B, or any other department. Guests are offered a good range of butler services and these are satisfactorily executed. Butler service has been established and fine-tuned with the assistance of trained professionals.

Four Butlers

Butlers provide excellent, often invisible service to guests who are wowed by the attention to detail. Includes a full complement of butlers who have sufficient presence with the rest of the employees that they have raised their level of service and can obtain instant service for guests. Butler Department personnel receive ongoing training and quality control to keep them sharp and there is a Deputy for the Head Butler who facilitates this training and other organizational steps to keep the Butler Department running smoothly.

Five Butlers

Guests have their own private butler to attend to their every (legal and ethical) needs and desires, including accompanying them on excursions as chauffeur and guide. In the case of guests lacking companions, this level of service may extend to the butler being a companion for a guest, even being skilled enough to play such as golf or tennis (but sufficiently diplomatic always to let the guest win by a narrow margin-and never crossing the line). Where spa service is offered, the butler may also be the spa therapist or so knowledgeable in spa methodology that he or she presents a seamless experience for the spa-going guest.

The full list of requirements for each level can be found at <http://www.modernbutlers.com/html/butler-rating-system.html>.

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