

Turning First-time Customers Into Regulars - By Ken Burgin

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Regulars are the life-blood of most businesses, and they all started with a first visit.

My first visit to a French restaurant last week had me thinking of all the small things that could be done to ensure customers come back a second or third time. The food was good and the service accurate, but there were many missed opportunities.

How do you know it's a first visit? The welcoming statement should gather information so you can tailor the service and make the visit special. This can be done quickly and easily with two questions:

1. 'Have you been here before?' Whatever the answer, this is the opportunity to give more information about the food and special features, how long you're been open, best place for parking etc.
2. 'Is this a special occasion?' A birthday? Bring on the candles. Visiting the area for the first time? Share some information about the location etc. Can't be bothered cooking? Talk about customer favourites on the menu.

Service for first-timers may need to be a little different to what's offered to regulars:

3. Share information in small chunks, rather than one long speech at the beginning. Take several opportunities to talk about the specials, the menu, the beverage choices, the dessert and any special events coming up.
4. Who's looking after us? Team work can be confusing for customers - some venues have a group effort for service, but there needs to be one person who's 'wide eyed' and watching out for the needs of each table. And a supervisor who's watching how they're watching!
5. Gather contact details for later. With my account recently at Adelaide's terrific Good Life Pizza, I received a small card asking for your email address. Ask and you will receive...don't ask and you'll never have a customer list.
6. Send them off with a souvenir - a business card and a copy of the menu. You never know where they will end up! Remind them about your website: 'it's on the card and on the menu'.
7. Follow up with a postcard - your feedback form may also ask for a mail address. In my café I would get about 25% of people giving an address on their feedback form. Once a week, a waitress would sit down with a pile of postcards and send a simple greeting from me. How were they to know it wasn't my handwriting? In the age of email, hand-written notes are more powerful than ever.
8. The final taste lingers - what was it? A nice dessert, good coffee, a glass of something special, a warm farewell, a good laugh?

Profitable Hospitality offers management and cost-control systems (Manuals & CD-ROMs) for restaurants, cafes, hotels, bars and clubs. The systems are based on the extensive consulting and operating experience of CEO Ken Burgin, and enable busy owners and managers to set up complete operating and cost-control systems in minutes, not months. Profitable Hospitality also runs regular management training workshops in the areas of kitchen profit & efficiency, restaurant marketing and functions management. A free monthly e-newsletter keeps you up to date on the latest industry management issues. www.profitablehospitality.com.

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