

Cornell Study Finds Customers View Restaurant Reservations as 'Firm Commitment'

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When restaurant customers make a reservation, they consider it a firm commitment that the restaurant will have their table ready, according to a new study from Cornell University.

The report, 'A Consumer's View of Restaurant Reservations Policies,' is available at no charge from Cornell's Center for Hospitality Research (<http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/reports/2008.html>).

'Restaurant customers view a reservation as an oral contract,' said report author Sheryl Kimes, who surveyed 1,230 visitors to restaurant websites, including the New York Times Diner's Journal blog, where the questionnaire was posted. 'To be fair, most of the respondents thought customers should alert the restaurant if they cannot keep their end of the contract,' said Kimes, a professor at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. 'One problem is, many of them find it hard to contact the restaurant when they need to make a reservations change.'

The survey found that customers were not keen on several policies designed to prevent no-shows, late-shows, or short-shows (when some, but not all of a party arrives). While the survey respondents generally supported the idea of giving away the table of a late-arriving party, for instance, they disliked policies that call for an entire party to be present before anyone is seated. Credit-card guarantees earned reluctant support in the survey.

Frank Bruni, reporter for the New York Times and author of the Diner's Journal blog, made the survey available (<http://www.dinersjournal.blogs.nytimes.com/>). In his coverage of responses to the survey, he noted: 'From my experiences in restaurants and the comments that come into this blog, it's become clear to me that there's a lot of tension between restaurateurs and diners, an enormous disparity between the kinds of rules and procedures that restaurants deem necessary and those that their customers deem fitting.'

Survey respondents recognized that staying overlong at a table can interfere with a restaurant's efforts to honor reservations, but they resisted being rushed. 'One thing that restaurants should be careful about is how to manage the pacing of a meal during busy times,' Kimes warned. 'As I've seen in other studies, these guests were adamant that they did not want to be rushed or asked to move if they were using a table longer than expected.'

Meet and interact with Dr. Kimes, an active member of the executive education faculty at the School of Hotel Administration, when she presents sessions in the Professional Development Program:
<http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/industry/executive/pdp/>.

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