

Cornell Restaurant Research Study of Guest Complaints Underscores Importance of Personal Contact

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New Restaurant Industry Study Examines Effect of Management Response to Complaints on Customer Attitudes and Behavior

If a restaurant's food or service is not right, you might expect guests to complain immediately to the server or to a manager. That's not always the way it goes, however, according to a new report from Cornell's Center for Hospitality Research. The restaurant research report, 'Complaint Communication: How Complaint Severity and Service Recovery Influence Restaurant Guests' Actions and Attitudes,' (www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/reports/2008.html) confirms that most guests do, in fact, talk directly to a manager when something goes seriously wrong - but not necessarily face-to-face.

The author of the newly released restaurant industry report, Alex Susskind, an associate professor at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, says the difficulties arise when guests don't follow the expected 'script' for complaints. 'When I asked over 800 restaurant guests what method they used to complain when they had a serious complaint, I expected them all to say that they talked directly with a manager,' he explained. 'That was true of many serious complaints, but there was also a large number who left the restaurant without speaking to anyone and then wrote a complaint letter to the manager.'

Restaurant Management Report Investigates the Resolution of Customer Complaints for Repeat Business

Susskind's restaurant management report found that those written complaints were just as serious as the ones that were raised face-to-face. 'Managers need to address those written complaints as if they were made in person, even though it's more difficult to make an adjustment,' he noted. 'One hopeful finding of this study is that the bulk of guests who have made a complaint do not hold a grudge when their complaint is satisfied, and most are willing to return to the restaurant.'

When it comes to serious complaints, Susskind found that food problems led the way, especially when service mistakes compounded the issue. Despite that finding, the study showed that complaints unrelated to food and service - such as noise or atmosphere - were more likely to prevent repeat patronage, even though respondents classified those 'other' problems as less important.

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

Thanks to the support of the partners listed below, all Cornell Hospitality Reports and Tools are made available free of charge from the center's website, www.chr.cornell.edu.

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