

Food & Beverage - A Time To Listen To Your Guests - By Joe Dunbar

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Whenever the economy turns down and discretionary income declines, the advantage shifts from hot new concepts to established names. The recent strike in Hollywood left many new programs without writers. These shows were just starting to build an audience. The strike put plenty of these shows out of the lineup when the strike ended too late. Previous winners survived.

Our industry is similar and the current downturn certainly hurts the hot start ups with huge recent cash outlays. Established restaurants, hotels, resorts and caterers have had years to help cover their start up investments.

Well established operators need to listen to their guests. Competition is fierce in many markets. This is an opportunity to regain lost market share. Broaden your base by listening to your loyal guests. If you know everyone by name, be sure to ask friends about lost regulars. Try to find out why you lost their loyalty.

I can remember several favorite spots I abandoned over time. Typically, I'm most sensitive to a drop in food quality or service. Some of my friends get tired of a concept due to menu stagnation. This would not be high on my personal list. I like to visit specialty restaurants with highly consistent quality.

I always encourage clients to eliminate dog menu items. However, I admit I stopped dining at a pizzeria in the New York metro area when they removed my favorite pie. This pizza was at the bottom of the printed menu and suffered from name confusion.

They decided to call a thin crust pizza with artichokes, salt cured olives, anchovies, fresh tomatoes, a dusting of cheese, thyme and olive oil - The Sicilian. We loved the pie and were disappointed when they dropped it. I'm sure they had many complaints from patrons expecting a thick crust square pizza with light tomato sauce and an avalanche of shredded mozzarella. When I told the manager he should try to revive the pie using a new name, he blew me off.

I'd go back in a New York minute if they offered this pizza again. They'll never know why I left. I am a silent complainer. Too many fantastic options are available. Many of your steady guests don't complain to management at all. They vote with their feet and go elsewhere.

The unusual nature of general ledger accounting is the inadequacy of the reports for identifying a disastrous week. Imagine your chef quits unexpectedly and you fly solo for a few weeks without a pro at the helm. The sales will not show the impact. Your books will reflect a lower management cost and a slightly higher profit.

In the dining room, patrons expecting the high quality they received in the past will leave disappointed. They may wait too long to receive a mediocre meal. A frustrated waiter informs regulars of the chef's departure. You have a major problem which will take a month or two to show up in the books. Over many years, the repeat of these bad weeks takes its toll.

People who demonstrate pure loyalty to a restaurant know the operation well. They know in advance when key staff members are on vacation. These guests know the nights of the week when their favorite wait staff member is not on duty. They know when to have a drink at the bar before sitting down in the dining room.

Now is a great time to greet and listen to your regulars when they come to your place. Find out what they order and if there is anything which could be done to improve their experience. Focus on consistently pleasing these loyal patrons.

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