

Customer is king

Fact: a business can be made or broken by reputation. But how do you know what your customers really think of you and whether the word they are spreading is good or bad? *EC* spoke to Sally Whelan, director, The Mystery Dining Company, one of the UK hospitality industry's leading customer experience analysts



Essentially Catering: Why is feedback so important? Surely people will let you know if they are not happy with something?

Sally Whelan: Customers are not just the heart of a business; they are also the eyes, ears and mouth. Operators who actively seek out objective observations and comparisons will have a competitive advantage. Without any form of mechanism in place to evaluate performance there is always a distinct possibility that an operator is unwittingly limiting sales potential by not offering the customer what they want.

EC: What is the best way to obtain feedback?

SW: Feedback can be obtained through comment cards, canvassing the opinions of friends and family, undertaking perception audits of local end users and suppliers, monitoring online review websites, asking for feedback on their own website, or by employing an independent third party. Whichever avenue is chosen, remember that food and drink is only a very small part of a customer's experience.

Good service, for example, will make a customer feel special and is the difference between a run-of-the-mill experience

and a memorable one. A recent industry-wide benchmarking project commissioned by the National Skills Academy for Hospitality found that while value for money is important (28%), the perceived warmth of service (31%) is even more so when considering why an individual would recommend a specific venue over another¹.

EC: Which other areas should be addressed in a questionnaire?

SW: The customer is forming his or her opinion from the second they see a venue, or earlier if they have called to make a booking. On arrival, they will be taking in aspects such as cleanliness, noise and general atmosphere before they even encounter a member of staff.

Don't be deceived, whether it is picking up a sandwich to go, spending an evening out with friends at a pub, sitting down for a meal or even staying overnight somewhere, customers understand that they are spending money on more than just a product. They are investing in an



experience; they want to be made to feel welcome and they want to come away from a venue feeling good. Feedback on all these experiences is invaluable.

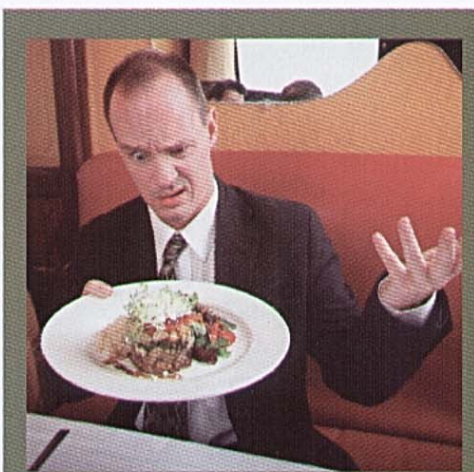
EC: What is a Mystery Visit?

SW: Qualified assessors visit establishments anonymously armed with a comprehensive questionnaire that has been devised in conjunction with the operator to address operational processes, client groups or elements of the experience specific to their business.

A validated report supplied within 24 hours of the visit contains detailed information about the experience – from how quickly orders were taken through to the availability of individual menu items and how clean the restaurant was at the time of the visit.

Mystery dining can be used for a number of different purposes. Some operators use it to achieve consistency across a number of different outlets while others use it to help refine timings or their menus. Others use it to learn as much as they can about the perceptions of different customer groups.

The Mystery Dining Company
T: 01225 470 281
www.mysterydining.com



Customer complaints

On occasion, you may receive feedback without asking for it. This will invariably be in the form of a complaint. Here is Sally's advice on how to rectify situations that could possibly be damaging for your business.

The way complaints are handled can be a deal-breaker for some customers so it's crucial to get it right.

A recent survey about how customers feel about giving feedback confirmed that, when making a complaint, acknowledgement by a member of the senior management team on duty is the preferred handling method (at 84%), with 94% of customers expecting to be compensated for a bad experience². Compensation preferences vary; if appropriate, offers of complimentary food or drink are well received by 7 out of 10 individuals, while money off the bill is a more popular alternative than a voucher if complaints are dealt with after a meal².

Ensure all staff understand the protocol for handling an unsatisfied customer; for example, let staff know if they are able to offer a complimentary drink or dessert without checking with management first. This allows staff to be more reactive and not leave the customer feeling as though they are waiting for a resolution.

1. Service benchmarking – Wave 2, National Skills Academy for Hospitality, Spring 2010
 2. Customer Feedback Survey, The Mystery Dining Company, Feb 2010

Never judge a book by its cover

The Anise Restaurant at the Felbridge Hotel and Spa, East Grinstead was recently voted as the Best Sussex Eating Experience at the annual Sussex Food and Drink Awards 2010. Armed with our very own Mystery Dining questionnaire, which had been tailor-made for the award-winning establishment, *EC* paid the Felbridge a visit



While it wins no prizes in the beauty stakes, the Felbridge's exterior is immaculately maintained



Mouthwatering delights are made with fresh local produce



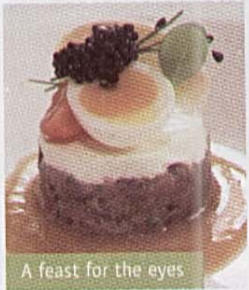
Chill out in the tranquil Chakra Spa



The extensive cocktail and wine lists will leave you spoilt for choice



Award-winning executive chef Frederick Tobin



A feast for the eyes



Culinary excellence awaits anyone who dines at The Anise Restaurant

If you have ever driven past the Felbridge Hotel and Spa on the A22 near East Grinstead in West Sussex, you would be forgiven for thinking that here is just one more anonymous hotel offering overnight accommodation to travellers before flying off from nearby Gatwick. However, to have been awarded the accolade of Best Sussex Eating Experience, the somewhat unprepossessing exterior of this 4★ hotel clearly belies what awaits within.

First impressions

The questionnaire asks: 'On arrival were the outside areas clean and well maintained?' Yes, the surroundings were immaculate. In spite of an early-spring visit, flowerbeds were tidy and not a speck of dirt could be spotted on the carefully swept paths. A promising start.

'Were you acknowledged as soon as you arrived at reception? Were you greeted with a warm, friendly smile?' With both of these boxes having been ticked we were shown to our room by a porter whose pride in his job was tangible, reflecting the attitude of everyone who works at the Felbridge. The walk from reception to room was just the start of being made to feel welcome by a team that gave the impression that if there was anything they could do to enhance our stay, then they would try their utmost to achieve it.

Cocktail paradise

Having ticked a few more boxes on the questionnaire including: 'Was the room spotlessly clean throughout?', 'Was the bed comfortable?' and 'Did you have sufficient clean towels for your stay?', we decided that a pre-dinner cocktail was most definitely in order.

As we entered the bar, the tender was nonchalantly tossing liqueur bottles in the air and when asked which of the many tantalising choices on the extensive cocktail menu he would recommend, he looked as though he had died and gone to heaven. For when it comes to his bottles, barman Bruce is a man of passion and more than happy to share his knowledge with customers who are interested. 'Did you feel the staff made you feel welcome with their approach and interaction with you?' They certainly did. Another tick.

Dining experience

'If you asked for a wine recommendation, was it given confidently?' Not only confidently, but with charm and the conviction that, in spite of our initial reservation at being recommended a bottle of Gewurztraminer to accompany our food, if we could overcome our prejudice, we might well be in for a pleasant surprise. Robin – our waiter/sommelier – was spot on.

In fact the delightful young man who had fairly recently joined the hotel after five years on beers and wines at the local Sainsbury's made our evening. Yes, the food was inventive and spectacularly delicious and chef Frederick Tobin deserves praise aplenty. However, to have the experience enhanced to such a degree by the impeccable Robin was wonderful and made it easy to understand how this gem of a

restaurant on the edge of a busy A road is the worthy winner of Best Sussex Eating Experience.

Last question: 'Do you agree with the following statement: "Anise is perfect for all those who are passionate about fine food and drink. The real reason guests join us week after week is the modern focused style and distinctly flavoured cuisine."' Box firmly ticked, although I would surmise that the excellent service experienced throughout our stay also plays a large part in encouraging repeat custom.

BACARDI mojito the original mojito

The light, crisp and refreshing Mojito cocktail was first drunk in the late 1800's in Cuba. The original recipe served in Havana's greatest bars used freshly squeezed lime juice, unrefined sugar, bruised mint and a jigger of BACARDI Superior rum.



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The Felbridge Hotel & Spa
London Road
East Grinstead
West Sussex
RH19 2BH
T: 01342 337700
www.felbridgehotel.co.uk