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The Science of Perfect Timing

Sally Whelan, Founding Director of guest experience experts HGEM, talks about the importance of perfect timing when serving your customers:

Timing in hospitality is an art and a science. At HGEM, it's something our guests tell us is extremely important to them. From creating a feeling of welcome and attentiveness by seating guests quickly and taking a drinks order as soon as possible, right the way through to dealing with the bill as quickly and efficiently as possible, getting the timing right can be the difference between a good experience and a bad one.

There's more to perfect timing than speed of service. Hospitality providers who understand this make sure everything – from lighting and furniture to background music – helps to create an atmosphere that fits their timing targets. These elements can help create a sense of busyness and momentum, and can have a surprisingly powerful impact on processing customers without making them feel rushed.

Recent innovations in payment, from apps to touch-screen ordering, have been introduced by some operators. Recently, I met with the payment app Fly Pay and was fascinated to hear about all the research they commissioned during the development of their product. Slow processing of payment was putting customers off returning to some chains. This was particularly an issue in pubs and restaurants where there were limited hand-held payment terminals and a high volume of customers. Apps that return control to the customer, allowing them to pay sometimes even before they've finished a meal, eliminates the frustration of waiting. It empowers customers to control timing.

But if technology is helping to solve this aspect of timing, when it comes to staff attentiveness during a meal and serving food in a timely fashion, the human element is key. For the smooth running of service, front of house staff need to employ a combination of script and intuition. Having basic set steps of service guidelines helps. However, these should always be used as a rough framework rather than a bible to follow blindly. Staff should be led foremost by their intuition, reading guests as individuals and speeding up or slowing down where appropriate.

At HGEM, clients tell us that one of the most useful aspects of the guest experience feedback we deliver is on timing of food delivery. Having an accurate picture of this helps to keep kitchen staff on their toes and gives a good steer on how far short of targets on timing a restaurant is falling.

Sometimes, there may be tensions between the guest processing speed an operator requires and the ideal speed of service for the guest. Where this is the case, a few things can help to bridge the gap. Being clear when guests book if you need the table back by a certain time, and politely reminding guests of this when they arrive, helps to manage expectations. Also, having areas beyond the tables – whether that's a bar with stools or a small lounge where customers can sit to finish their drinks – can help when a party wants to hang around for a bit longer than expected at the end of their meal. This makes sense in commercial terms, too – extra drinks and coffees make for a bigger spend.

There are some instances where any sense of feeling rushed is a no-no – this is the case whenever you're somewhere luxurious, or spending a lot of money. Part of the luxury is the time you can spend over the meal, so feeling hurried along just won't wash if you're in a top end restaurant. Timing should always match the setting.