

This month The Mystery Dining Company examines how licensees can make the most of their customer service during the Christmas party season and swell takings over the festive period

We wish you merry customers

With pubs increasingly moving into offers traditionally dominated by the budget-restaurant sector, the Christmas party season is now seen as an opportunity to make some serious cash.

While there can be no doubt that the festive period is an extremely profitable time for the trade, publicans are being urged to tread carefully, as mistakes at this time can be costly.

As part of The Mystery Dining Company's (TMDC's) series of monthly features focusing on customer engagement, we look at the opportunities and pitfalls the festive party season can hold for publicans, specifically those taking the fight to restaurant chains to capture a share of the Christmas dining market.

53%
the proportion of customers who think that venues tend to sacrifice quality in favour of turnover at Christmas

38%
the proportion of diners who would use an internet search before booking

Be prepared
TMDC has conducted a survey of customer expectations in the lead-up to the party season.

The study has thrown up a number of results that publicans should take note of.

The key revelation from TMDC's survey of 278 diners is that pubs need to think about their Christmas arrangements early.

It revealed that 10% were preparing to make their Christmas bookings in September, with a further 24% planning to do so in October. With so many people looking to book early, it is essential you have arrangements in place for Christmas and are ready to reserve the places.

Good phone manner
Of those surveyed who said they would book Christmas meals for groups, 69% indicated they would do so over the phone. This call will be the first part of the customer experience, so it is vital the first impression is a good one. With only 11% of those surveyed saying they will choose a venue for their Christmas party on the basis of having been there before, it is highly likely this call will be the customer's first contact with your venue.

Keep staff in the loop
It's all very well getting Christmas arrangements in place early, but do staff know? You need to be confident that whoever answers the phone will not be caught off-guard with a Christmas booking.

Of course, it's understandable they may not know all the answers in terms of menu and options at this stage, but it's essential they get them quickly.

TMDC's survey revealed that, if staff don't have information to hand for that first call, 84% of those asked said they would expect the venue to get back to them the same day, and almost half within four hours.

Get it right on the night
Once a booking has been made and the big night arrives, what do customers look for in their chosen

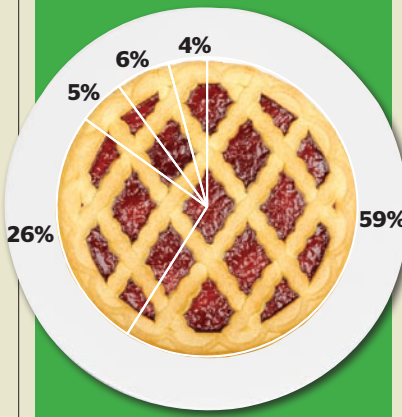


Christmas checklist

- Customers start booking Christmas meals and parties in September – be prepared
- Have you got the information in place to handle enquiries about Christmas bookings, menu options etc?
- Have you briefed staff?
- Christmas can be a very lucrative time, but get it wrong and it can damage your reputation for the rest of the year.

Preferred style of food for a Christmas meal or party

Response	Percentage
Traditional Christmas dishes	59%
A menu featuring lighter or modern food	26%
Ethnic-style dishes	5%
Hearty meals (stews, pies, roasts etc)	6%
Other, please specify	4%



Festive fare: a traditional Christmas meal is favoured by 59% of diners



IMAGE: BEER.GEMECOLUK

venue? TMDC used the survey to gain insight into what revellers want from their night out.

The survey showed it is a close-run thing between the venue's atmosphere and location (33%), value for money (30%) and the menu (27%). Digging a bit deeper, it would seem that traditional Christmas fare still holds the most appeal, with 59% saying they prefer traditional dishes for their festive party. Just over a quarter (26%) said they would like to see lighter, modern cuisine.

A menu offering both options would be a clear winner, although operators should be careful not to let selection compromise quality, as 50% of those surveyed said food was the most important element of their festive bash. Furthermore, 55% are of the opinion that the kitchen being unable to cope with volume of orders is the biggest challenge to customer service over Christmas.

Reputation is everything

TMDC asked those thinking of booking a venue for a Christmas meal or party this year how they would create a shortlist of potential venues.

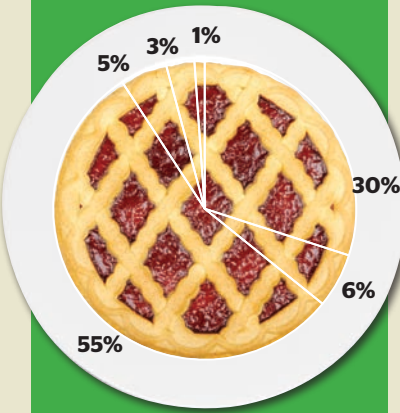
Around 45% of respondents indicated they would go with a word-of-mouth recommendation, with a further 38% saying they would use an internet search. Furthermore, of those surveyed, 81% said they would consider returning to the same venue as the previous year.

There appears to be a perception

that venues tend to sacrifice quality in favour of turnover at Christmas, with 53% of those surveyed by TMDC believing this to be the case. Avoid this, and a positive customer experience first time round could make filling your venue the following year a lot easier.

Biggest challenges to customer service perceived over Christmas

Response	%
Insufficient number of staff	30%
Staff lacking in confidence to handle problems	6%
Kitchen not coping with the volume of orders	55%
Disturbances from other patrons or big groups	5%
Problems with the final bill or payment methods	3%
Other	1%



Key points to bear in mind for a great Xmas

**Sally Whelan
Director
The Mystery Dining Company**



The Christmas party season can make or break a venue's financial year and if you get it right, can not only be profitable in the short term, but expose you to many new customers and win repeat business.

Our survey really hammers home the importance of planning early for your customer service over Christmas, as people start to make bookings as early as September, and the first phone call will kick off their customer experience.

TMDC can help publicans and other hospitality operators at this time through our 'mystery call service'. This helps businesses improve their phone booking system by giving an independent appraisal of the service they receive over the phone when booking a table.

A positive experience when booking helps set the scene for a customer's visit. If they are not satisfied with the service they received over the phone, they

may decide not to make a booking for fear of similarly poor service. On the flip side, if they receive excellent service on the phone, they will be reassured they have chosen the right venue for their celebration.

Our assessors ask questions designed to test the knowledge of the staff member taking the call. This could include areas such as menu options, wheelchair access or opening times.

There has traditionally been a perception that hospitality operators have sacrificed quality and service at Christmas in favour of turnover and profit. It is important publicans don't go down this road.

Remember, a lot of customers will experience your venue for the first time over Christmas, and word-of-mouth recommendations count for a lot in this fiercely-competitive sector. A good experience at Christmas could make your marketing for the rest of the year a lot easier.



The Mystery Dining Company provides customer-experience analysis for a range of hospitality businesses, from single-site operations through to multi-national chains, enabling them to use customer feedback to help improve profitability and build brand reputation. www.mysterydining.com

