

Two steps to guest experience heaven

Brand standards are still the foundation to a great guest experience, says Steven Pike, and staff do not have to be robots in order to stick to one and then deliver the other

For many operators, "brand standards" has almost become a dirty phrase, as they look to offer customers an individual, unique experience, whether they are an independent restaurant or a chain of 300 venues.

Furthermore, as we all know, increased table turns means increased sales. Staff must thus be able to maximise covers without negatively impacting on the guest experience and giving your site a bad reputation.

Brands have evolved from Generation Robot, where every site looks the same, all the staff act the same, and so the guest's experience is the same every time: bland, repetitive and boring. However, smart operators recognise that a robust set of brand standards is what underpins the guest experience – which, in turn, defines the brand standards and how they are differentiated from the competition.

It is a "chicken and egg" scenario – the brand standards are the framework that the experience is wrapped around. You cannot have one without the other. If you have the framework of brand and operational standards in place and your staff know what is expected of them (you want them to almost be able to do the fundamentals of their role in their sleep) then you can leave them to focus on proper engagement with the guest, reading their needs, communicating with them in a personal manner, and all those things that you cannot do if you use a robot.

Vital

If there are three steps to heaven, as Showaddywaddy tried to persuade us, there are only two steps to guest experience bliss. Step one: operators need to have the brand standards in place, based on the kind of experience they want guests to have. Step two: the guest experience will follow. It will not work in the opposite direction. We do quite often see businesses who think it can – they say, "We'll just find out if people are happy at the end of their experience, and if they are, that's great. If they're not, we'll see what we can learn from it." This is a risky approach: without the right foundations in place, it is difficult to ensure key learnings are applied and the way your team operates changes. There are also some valuable standards that may not be considered if you simply worked backwards from a guest experience but which can both positively impact it and improve your bottom line; suggestive selling is one example.

Measurement is vital here. It is very hard to articulate the link between brand standards and guest experience without a means of measurement. Evaluating the execution of your brand standards, and how this impacts on the guest experience is important, whatever your type of operation. If you are offering a full-service environment, then you are going to have lots of steps of service to manage, so clearly, standards should be

robust. But even in a grab 'n' go environment, businesses will operate within a certain framework and expect certain things from their employees. From established brands such as Pret A Manger to the crop of challengers, such as Leon and Apostrophe, they know that, even if they are the busiest place in town, customers should not have to queue and should always be served with a smile. This does not happen by accident. It is because of the standards the business sets and the efficiency of the operational guidelines functioning behind the scenes.

However, when defining your brand standards, always begin with your expectations of what the guest will remember of their experience. If you went back several years, there were fewer ways of running your operation, no matter how many sites you had. But this has changed.

Originality

If your brand standards do not facilitate or motivate teams to be creative, then the experience is not going to be memorable for the customer, it is not going to be talked about and you are not going to get people coming back in. Vice-versa, if you just focus on employing people who are happy and great at engaging with people but not actually efficient behind the scenes, then it will be an uphill struggle to get the experience right in the first place. These two aspects of the business have to work in tandem: it is like a dance. Memorability is what will make you stand out and cause guests to return or recommend. But beware the negative impact of not being dependable, for this will surely get shared too.

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Every company is different; what makes one successful is different to what makes another successful and you need to have that balance between both the originality of the guest experience and the efficiency of the brand standards. But both are part of the same continuum, each reinforcing the other. Be sure to measure them, then continually reflect, learn and evolve, for the market will not stand still. ■

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HospitalityGEM is the UK's leading expert in guest experience management (GEM). The company provides hospitality operators with tools for intelligence gathering, guest engagement and staff learning, working closely with them with a personal approach and modern software to help generate revenue growth through effective GEM

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