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EMPLOYEES

Without This Training, Your Waitstaff Could Lose You Customers

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Releasing your waitstaff onto the floor with the bare minimum amount of restaurant training isn't going to win you five-star reviews or Instagram shares. Because waiters are the face and attitude of your brand, restaurant server training programs should be one of your top priorities as an owner.

"The end result of training needs to be that the brand's voice is coming through the server," says Ray Camillo, founder and CEO of Blue Orbit Restaurant Consulting. If your waitstaff aren't prepared to parrot the emotion and phrases of your brand, then they're not ready to interact with customers, he says.

If your servers don't know how provide exceptional customer service or handle the times when things go wrong, your restaurant is in for migraine-sized problems.

Developing a Server Training Program

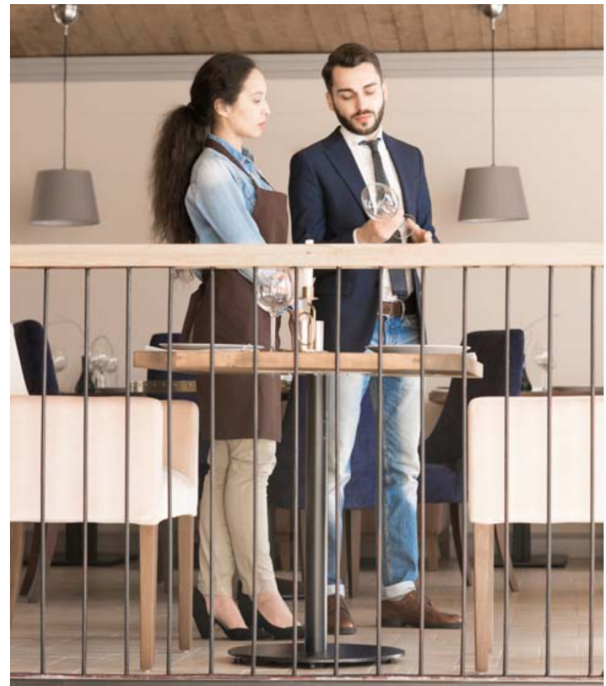
Culinary director at quick-service restaurant Holler and Dash, Brandon Frohne, says having a solid training program allows them to drive home brand values and work on increasing efficiency and productivity.

"If you're well-trained, you're going to know how to do your job [and] know how to do it quicker," explains Frohne, "For us, when we have a team member that's going through training, it's all about asking and listening. It's one of the most important values you can have when you're training people, and we're always asking for feedback all the time on how we can do things better."

A commonly overlooked aspect is the actual development of a strong, effective training program, he adds. When you're trying to attract talent to your restaurant, Frohne says you need to have set goals, initiatives, clear values, and a structured program that teaches all those elements to new staff so they can be shared with customers.

For their new-hire training program, Holler and Dash combines tech platform PlayerLync with on-the-job feedback from top-level staff. The PlayerLync app combines photos, videos, search capabilities, recipes, cleaning manuals and checklists, opening and closing checklists, and training documents into a package that helps waitstaff stay on track.

The next step in training program development is to create a team that sees being a server trainer as a privilege. This position should also come with extra perks like vacation days, preferential treatment on certain stations, and other extras they can earn, says Camillo. GMs or owners can create server rankings and select trainers from the best performers; however, the



trainer selection program must be run by a manager who's already completed their own restaurant manager training program, he says.

"Do [trainers] listen for questions? Are they answering the right questions? Are they giving the right content?" says Roxy Staubitz, corporate trainer at Holler and Dash, "As long as they do well with you, give them a couple of different tries and even if you pair them with a new trainee, give them the training checklist and have them train somebody for a day just to see how they're doing, then you can validate them as a trainer."

It can be difficult for a server to move into a supervisor role because they're now managing others they used to be working side-by-side with. But when other waitstaff see the newly minted trainer working hard to implement the right techniques, they end up earning respect from their peers, says Camillo.

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Hiring and the Training Process

Once your program and restaurant training team are rock-solid, owners need to make sure they're hiring the right fits for their brand. "It's awfully tough to [sculpt] a great server if you aren't starting with great clay," explains Camillo, who says he encourages owners to hire for 10-second likeability, "If I don't like you within 10 seconds, I'm not going to like you ever."

Because servers are in sales as well as customer service, they need to win over customers with sincerity and friendliness in a natural way. You can train anyone to wait tables, but making sure your employees are tuned into the guest's experience is what counts, says Camillo. He recommends finding someone who can provide fantastic service over flashy resume highlights.

When reviewing what the restaurant training program must include, experts say to consider the following:

- Flow of service
- Teamwork or circulation system
- Service expectations
- Menu and product knowledge including ingredients and allergy considerations
- Explanation of all menu items
- Where tables and guests are greeted
- Any service signals (e.g. napkins on tables signaling the server to approach the table to get drink orders)

Holler and Dash uses the process of "tell show do" to help new hires become acquainted with the way their restaurants operate. Staubitz says in addition to using PlayerLync, they tell the staff member how to do something, teach them by showing them how to do it, and then ask them to perform the task either for practice or when a customer orders. She also recommends staying encouraging and patient with staff, and getting to know them so that it's easier to help them with various tasks.

"It's more important that employees feel like they belong there, that they're wanted there, that they're expected to be there, and the way we do that is [through] the first few days of training," says Camillo.

He advises not letting waitstaff onto the floor until they've served the general manager or a trainer as a test. This allows experienced staff to critique their service, explain what they did well, what could be improved, and if they didn't achieve a good score, when they can retake the test.

Providing Feedback During Training

To avoid future customer issues, restaurant owners need to be comfortable giving frequent positive and negative feedback during the server training program. This feedback helps the new waitstaff know what's right and where they need improvement, and also excites the server into taking the right steps.

Frohne says they have "Biscuit Magic" meetings every morning where the team breaks bread together and talks about goals for the day, areas of opportunity for better service or operations, feedback on issues, and good team work moments. "The greatest thing you can do is give that feedback to the team members because [it shows] you're investing in them," he says.

Train Today for Tomorrow's Servers

When it comes down to restaurant training, experts recommend having fun with it, keeping it modern, seeing it as an opportunity for improvement, and a chance to reiterate the brand values you worked hard on creating.

"If your team members are competent in what they do, it's going to create an awesome culture," explains Frohne, "They're going to be happy and that's going to translate over to the guest and it's going to provide so many opportunities, whether that's upsell opportunities or driving that overall experience for your brand."

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