

# Don't Forget Your Internal Customers

by Barry Morgan and John Nick

Your customers are not simply those who enter your premises to procure the services and enjoy the facilities you offer. Every operation has both external and internal customers. External customers are those who support your clubhouse operations. Conversely your internal customers are those who rely on the success of your operation for their support. You depend on both.

The foundations and cornerstones of "profitable patterns" for success in food and beverage encompass all the human elements of your business.

Embracing the concepts of earlier articles you have established your vision and stated the fundamental principles and values within which you are prepared to operate.

You've hired the right staff with the right attitude to take on the right jobs, thereby creating a true and meaningful partnership for profits.

Your customers - internal and external, represent the final block in the base of our pyramid. This article focuses on the interaction between you as an owner or operator and your customers.

*"Good Morning, may I help you Sir?"*

*"Yes, I believe there's a reservation in my name, Greg Harti, that's with an i, not a y"*

*"Could you confirm the number of people in your party, Mr. Harti?"*

*"Well originally it was for four, but I understand that Mr. MacDonald will not be joining us for lunch, but will arrive in time for golf."*

*"Thank you Mr. Harti, that will be a window table for three, please follow me."*

Although it may not sound like it, the dining room employee has no idea who Mr. Harti is, and there is no record of his reservation. When he checks with the receptionist, she confirms his worst fears. No messages from Mr. MacDonald and no sign of a tee-time reservation under the name of Harti.

*"Excuse me Mr. Harti, I have informed the golf shop that if a Mr. MacDonald arrives to let the dining room know, and I will be happy to show him through. At what time do you tee off Mr. Harti?"*

*"At 1.32, and could you confirm that the power cars are complimentary too?"*

*"Certainly Mr. Harti, I'll confirm that with the golf shop."*

Meanwhile, behind the scenes the other members of staff, in the absence of the manager, are attempting to validate Mr. Harti's reservation. Sure enough, there's the complimentary lunch reservation, as plain as day, for the following week. The golf shop has confirmed there was a 1.32 tee time for that same day under the name of Harti. Attached to the reservation is a note that a visiting diplomat and his colleagues had been invited by the owner with arrangements made through the manager.

The employee returns to the table in the dining room and confirms....

*"Your power cars have been reserved by the golf shop, Sir and they will be expecting you on the tee at 1:32."*

A few days later a note of thanks arrives on the manager's desk from Mr. Harti. He stated that their visit was a success in light of their last minute change in plans, and to pass on his compliments to all the staff for a memorable day. What Mr. Harti did not realize was that his secretary had telephoned the day after their visit to apologize profusely, for not informing the club of the change in their dates. True story? You bet! Of course the names have been changed.

Most operators in our industry will go to any length to enhance the success of their operation. All their energies are singularly focused in the relentless pursuit of acquiring new and returning customers. What's wrong with that? Absolutely nothing. But the key to the front door lies under the mat of relationships you cultivate between your external and internal customers. Focusing your energies on one type of customer at the expense of the other will only fuel the fires of discontent.

## **Feedback**

It is particularly important in any service related industry to establish a common ground for your customers (both internal and external) to comment on the services provided. For example, customer comment cards are often used to provide an insight from the customers' perspective on the service and quality of product you offer. Most comment cards state that the customers opinion is valued and appreciated, and that the need for feedback is important in the operator's attempt to enhance services in the future. But what about your internal customers? Their feedback is also important and often overshadowed or ignored in favor of the others.

**Your internal customers are often skeptical when comment cards are introduced, and for good reason. Service staff often feel scorned and left**

**humiliated as a result of reviewing customer comment cards. The humiliation stems from the perception that their response and opinions are valued differently from those they serve.**

Generally comment cards by necessity are subjectively based. You ask your customers their opinion of the 'presentation' of food, 'quality' of service, 'atmosphere and ambiance' etc. If poorly elicited, these comments may provide only ambiguous feedback rather than constructive input. We have all experienced the computerized questionnaire, that asks you to rate your responses 'very poor, poor, average, good or excellent'. They tend to be superficial and seem to stimulate the negative first and the positive last. And if there are 99 positive comments and one negative remark, we all know which one we believe and tend to focus on. Any wonder your staff are leery and skeptical?

Keep in mind that the object of asking your customers for input is to obtain information which might enhance your ability to provide services and products that exceed your external customers' expectations. To properly address this objective, you need to focus on developing the relationship between those who are being served and those who are serving them.

To cultivate a better understanding of the expectations of your external customers it is necessary to involve your internal customers in the process. This should be done by including them in a non judgmental review of the comments after the fact. You must start with the premise that they have done the best job possible under the circumstances. If comments are not positive, you need to explore the reasons with them and allow them to be part of the solution. Negative comments must be construed as opportunities for change and growth.

The self esteem of your internal customers must be enhanced at the conclusion of this review if you hope to effect any meaningful change in service. The thank you or tap on the back for a job well done is what keeps many service staff within the industry. The attention for their efforts often goes unrewarded internally, and their opportunity to shine is sadly missed. A positive rating system on your comment cards can be helpful to the process. One way to achieve this is to simply ask your clients to rate the services you provide as having 'exceeded, met, or did not meet' their expectations.

As operators, we must accept the fact that, on occasion, individual customers may express dissatisfaction with specific aspects of our service. However, the fact that your external customer did not like a particular steak or chicken entrée and indicated in their response that the meal did not meet their expectations does not necessarily mean the meal was prepared or served improperly. We have all 'tested' on occasion the steak that was returned to the kitchen and confirmed with little surprise that there was nothing wrong with it.

The issue in this instance is merely that the entrée was unacceptable. Consider for a moment that the customer may be experiencing some difficulties with his or her dentures and wants to avoid embarrassment at any cost, including sending a perfectly good steak back to its creator in the kitchen. In simplistic descriptive terms, our industry must focus on **'serving and satisfying'** our guests on a consistent basis. The best solution in this circumstance may be to simply replace the steak with an acceptable substitute redoubling all efforts to make the remainder of the dining experience positive for both the guest and the staff involved in the service.

The damage caused by reacting negatively to negative situations may not be helpful to the long term objective of improving service. In some cases and certainly at the height of service it is often better to embrace the concept often expressed, that if there is nothing good to say, say nothing. There will be plenty of time afterwards to examine the circumstances of the situation and develop strategies for the future.

**If nothing else, value the response and opinions of your team players as they are your customers too! For you to achieve your goals, the positive mind set of your internal customers is paramount. Con-stantly remind yourself to listen with your ears and hear from your heart. Remove any doubt in their perception of your sincerity as to the value of their responses and opinions. Always encourage and embrace the positive spirit and professionalism of your internal customers for they are your ambassadors and the key to your future success. Your internal customers provide that vital link between you as an operator and your external customers.**

While comment cards are the most common means of obtaining feed back they are not necessarily the best. We live in a highly interactive world. Enhancing the relationship between your internal and external customers may be, in the long run, the best way to ensure an enduring improvement in the level of service you provide. This might be achieved by encouraging round table chat sessions between your staff and your guests, removed from the daily routines of service.

For example, why not invite selected guests, particularly individuals who may have had cause to complain in the past, to join you for a free breakfast discussion meeting or luncheon gathering. At this meeting, attended by a broad cross section of staff and guests, you might encourage a frank and open discussion regarding the strengths and weaknesses of your operation.

As a result of this discussion you might find that your staff have an enhanced appreciation of the importance of ensuring that they remain attentive to your guests' needs and expectations. More importantly, they will respect the opportunity they have had to participate. And if the meeting was focused on the positive aspects of improvement, they will most certainly come away better

equipped and prepared to effect the change necessary to resolve past service concerns.

**Visions and Values, Hiring Right, Establishing Partnerships for Profit and paying attention to your Customers both Internal and External. This is the human element of your organization and it forms the foundation upon which you will build your future success. At the end of the day, all of the stakeholders in your organization must be interacting on a level playing field where trust and respect are the rule of thumb. Anything less is unacceptable. In this regard, your pyramid for profits and blueprint for success have been immeasurably supported.**