

Guest Comment Cards

A Special Report from Bill Main

The most frequently asked question I receive from independent restaurateurs and small chains is, "What do I do when Applebees [or Red Lobster or Outback] comes to town?" This is indicative of a trend all across the country. What is going on here?

The answer is simple. As the stock market approaches the 6,000 barrier, public restaurant companies are awash with cash. Prime sites in major markets are already taken. So, where can they go? Smaller markets, of course. Markets that are traditionally the dominion of the smaller independents and chains—your market.

The threat to your livelihood from this incursion is decidedly a threat. The big boys can afford to break even, maybe even lose a little money while slicing the pie even thinner, and simply wait it out, putting you in an even tougher position to survive.

I've even heard rumors that the big chains target smaller markets previously dominated by strong independents, and then build there to establish a foothold for the long term. Such a notion certainly squares with the continuing development in small markets.

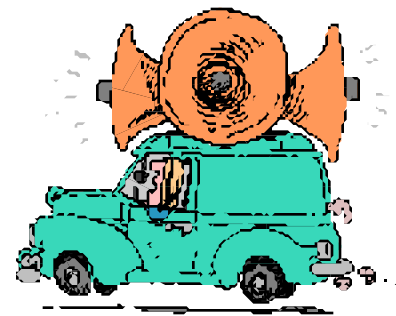
How can you, as an operator, fight back? By refocusing on your most precious resource: your existing customers. The purest form of marketing is not external print advertising, sports promotions, or week night 2-for-1's. It's concentrating with a fresh perspective on the core of your business—food, service, cleanliness, and an honest, sincere reaffirmation of appreciation for the guest.

Sounds too easy, doesn't it?

Well, the greatest—and most important—challenge in our business is to maintain the correct and consistent execution of the basics, time after time, day in, day out. Because it is ultimately the basics that will keep the guests coming back.

And once a guest leaves, it's expensive to get them back. As a matter of fact, it cost three times more to acquire a new customer than it does to keep an existing customer.

That guest walking out the door has the power to be the best ambassador the restaurant could ever want. They have the ability to generate the most powerful form of advertising available to an operator: word-of-mouth. And there's an added bonus... they're unpaid!



However, there is a flip side. That guest can also become the restaurant's worst nightmare—an unhappy patron. When guests are happy,

they typically tell three people. But when they are unhappy, they tell *fourteen* people! Indeed, restaurant bashing is one of our society's greatest indoor sports. And the problem usually gets worse before it gets better. Why? Because most guests vote with their feet, without ever telling the operator what was wrong. The possibilities are endless: the prices were too high; the portions were too small; the rest room was dirty; the china was chipped; or, the pepper shaker was clogged and didn't shake right. In this sense, people are almost universal. If the meal or overall dining experience was only mediocre, with no real problems, but was less than a fair performance by your restaurant, *they just don't come back*.



This is a problem that most operators know they must address, but feel helpless to solve. You can, though, with a proven and tested “back-to-basics” approach.

I’m talking about developing a proactive and systematized way to intercept your unhappy guests before they leave and begin to spread a negative report about your operation. It is time tested, and forges a new linkage between you and your customer at the crucial point when they are paying their bill. It is then that their satisfaction level is the most sensitive and easy to measure.

The means is the Guest Comment Card—what I call the “line-of-sight” connection to the guest. It is presented at the perfect time, when the guest is paying the check. It can be delivered by the server at tableside or by the cashier. The comment card allows you to systematically obtain opinions from members of a fickle marketplace. Don’t forget: Everyone fancies him or herself a restaurant critic of some sophistication. After all, everyone knows how to eat, don’t they?

A properly executed Guest Comment Card system can deliver powerful results in three specific and vital areas:

1. It can intercept problems before they go out the door and into the marketplace in the form of “restaurant bashing.” The comment card is an accepted part of day-to-day hospitality and foodservice activity, and is commonly employed in establishments to preserve high quality standards.
2. It is also a strategic marketing tool to capture mailing list or database information that the operator can use to build a frequency program. Remember, it costs three times as much to find a new customer as it does to bring back an existing customer more frequently. Do the math on that one.
3. It reinforces, at the point of purchase (the end of the meal), the sincere concern and commitment the restaurant has to insuring guest satisfaction. This is no small point. Employees trained to distribute and collect comment cards should send a signal—in a pure and unassuming way—that they are people who really care. This can help establish an enduring relationship with their customers.

The Guest Comment Card should feature the restaurant logo and be printed on a nice paper stock. Using cheap paper may be perceived as a lack of concern. The card should also be cut into a unique size. The idea here is to still have the paper cut from standard 8½ x 11" or 8½ x 14" stock, but to have a different "look" to catch the guests' attention.

A properly designed Guest Comment Card should feature three individual sections, each of which seeks a different piece of information. The sample comment card presented on page four incorporates all the important data you will want to capture.

The rating portion of the comment card should take approximately one minute for the guest to complete:

SERVICE

Using a 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) rating, the patron evaluates three attributes related to service. Each of these—friendliness, timeliness and "knowledgeability"—is self-explanatory. It is important to recognize, however, that while these may seem simplistic, they are traditionally areas to which restaurant guests ascribe the most importance.

FOOD

Using the same rating system, guests assess the food's quality, appearance and taste. Interestingly, most guests assign different priorities to each of these three food attributes. Taste is not always the most important to your guests.



SETTING

Whether you call it atmosphere, interior or ambiance, this sets the restaurant's tone and shapes the guests' perceptions about their dining experiences. All three attributes (cleanliness, comfort and ambiance) are crucial, but cleanliness is always the most essential component in the mix.

Guest Comment Card

To Our Guests: Please take a moment to complete this comment card. We value your opinion, and thank you for helping us to monitor the quality of our products and service. If you add your name and address, you will automatically be enrolled in our BIRTHDAY CLUB, as well as be entered in our monthly drawing for free lunch and dinner certificates.

Service

Poor

Excellent

Friendliness

1

2

3

4

5

Timeliness

1

2

3

4

5

Knowledgeability

1

2

3

4

5

Food

Quality

1

2

3

4

5

Appearance

1

2

3

4

5

Taste

1

2

3

4

5

Setting

Cleanliness

1

2

3

4

5

Comfort

1

2

3

4

5

Ambiance

1

2

3

4

5

What do you like best about RedRock Cafe?

How can we improve?

Was there anything you didn't like?

What items would you like to see added to our menu?

How did you hear about us?

Will you return?

How often do you eat at RedRock Cafe?

Name

Birthday

Address

Anniversary

City, State, Zip

Date

Phone

Location

Once the first section is completed, the guest will be asked to answer these pointed and straightforward questions:

1. What do you like best about RedRock Café?

Ideally, you should look for reinforcement of your USPs (Unique Selling Propositions), which reflect the best features in food, service or environment that your restaurant has to offer. Additionally, you may discover that there are new or different USPs, in the opinion of the guest, that you had not previously realized or focused on.

2. How can we improve?

This question will surely elicit great insights from your guests. From cold food to surly attitudes to filthy parking lots, your guests will always find some area for improvement.

3. Was there anything you didn't like?

Again, a great prompt. Everyone loves to give an opinion, particularly about that which they didn't like. It is a sign of the frustrated critic in us all!

4. What items would you like to see added to our menu?

What a concept! Have your guests tell you what they wish you were offering. This feedback can help you create new menu items or specials that will bring the customer back again and again.

5. How did you hear about us?

Word-of-mouth advertising, at least in the foodservice business, is your most precious resource—and the price is right. Asking your guests this question is the perfect chance to stimulate that ambassadorial quality. The answer is always enlightening, and sometimes unexpected. The information you gather from this question should be logged into a database.



6. Will you return?

This is where you should look first. The simplicity of the question will prompt everyone to answer. If the answer is no, immediately look to the guest's name and telephone number and start the damage control process. It offers you the chance to turn an unhappy patron into a satisfied guest that *will* return to your establishment.

7. How often do you eat at RedRock Café?

This question will provide more information for your database. It is quite meaningful to ascertain how often your guests return. Why? You can establish a relationship between how often they return and the ideal frequency of menu changes, timing of specials, promotional selections, etc.

The last section of the Guest Comment Card is the one I call "vital statistics."

Remember, by definition, the comment card is intended to be a positive experience—user-friendly in all respects. So, don't worry about any section that guests don't fill out. You'll find, however, that the majority will answer all the questions and give you the most coveted pieces of information of them all: name, address, telephone number, and, if you are really lucky, birthday and anniversary dates.

Probably the most important of these are the birthday and anniversary dates. These critical dates will allow you to develop a tickler file that will remind you, two weeks in advance, of the upcoming special date. This is the perfect opportunity for a personal invitation to return. You have the guest's address, and you know they have previously visited restaurant. And chances are that they had a good experience the first time.

Imagine if your waiters and waitresses were to each spend 10 minutes a day handwriting postcard invitations to these guests, as a way of wishing them "Happy Birthday" or "Happy Anniversary" from the RedRock Café. Traditionally, the success rate for these handwritten postcard invitations is 15–20%, and the cost—postcards, stamps and a few minutes of staff time—is very minimal.



You have not only used the Guest Comment Card to generate repeat customers, but you have also found a way to differentiate your operation from the big chain: the personal touch.

Consider these three important protocols:

1. The comment card should be delivered by the server at the time the guest check is presented for payment. A preset script should be developed and practiced at the pre-shift briefing. It is important that the server create and rehearse a polite and gracious request that is both comfortable and easy to deliver. It must sound sincere to the guests so that they will take the time to fill out the comment card.

For example, a server would approach the table with the completed guest check folio on a tip tray. Adjacent to the bill would be a blank comment card ready for presentation. The server might say:

Thank you very much. I hope you enjoyed your dinner at the RedRock Café. We are anxious to get your suggestions and feedback on how we can serve you better. If you could take a moment and fill out this comment card, it would be much appreciated.

The server may also wish to say:

If you'll fill out the comment card, we'll place you on our mailing list as part of our extended RedRock family. We can then keep you informed as to seasonal promotions like our Texas Ribeye Week, Wisconsin Fish Broil Weekend, or Cajun Seafood Gumbo promotions.

This establishes a foundation for a frequency program that can reward loyalty buying patterns akin to airline frequent flyer miles.

The comment card should never be placed between the salt and pepper shaker as part of the tabletop setup. This suggests that filling out the card is only an option, and the opportunity for a personal connection, as described above, is lost.

2. The contents of the comment card should not take more than two minutes to fill out. Moreover, the questions should be short, succinct and uncomplicated. A good example is, "Will you come back?" Think about the simplicity of that question, and its importance. It just about says it all in only four words.
3. The comment card should be hand carried by the guest to the cashier, or placed in a basket or bowl of some kind at the main entrance or exit of the facility. In this way, waiters and waitresses are not tempted to intercept negative comment cards to protect their own self interests.

Management can then review the comment cards, process the information, and act accordingly. When appropriate, a handwritten letter of apology or appreciation from management can be extremely effective. The public will usually be forgiving if the apology is from the heart, is presented in a personal way (i.e., handwritten), and is accompanied by some type of premium or gift certificate as an incentive to return.

The Guest Comment Card is the ultimate system to insure that your operation and your staff maintains a line-of-sight communication with your customers. Its value as a vehicle to build a mailing list, or database, of regular customers cannot be underestimated. It is truly the wave of the future.