

Accidents happen – but you shouldn't lose existing customers

A cautionary tale for hoteliers



Guest who is checking out

I've decided that I am not coming back to stay here in future

Guest service agent

Can I suggest I call the duty manager?

Duty manager

Good morning, madam. I understand that you have stayed with us on several occasions including the last three nights, that you feel we have let you down and you're cancelling next week's reservation. I'd like the opportunity to change your mind. What can I do to make that happen?

Guest

It's too late. I've been staying here off and on for more than a year now. I've probably spent 20 nights in your hotel and spent several thousands of pounds with you. My client, who pays for my full board accommodation while I am in town, has corporate rate agreements with three hotels in the area. Until today, I have chosen to stay here because it's a hotel with a new fresh feeling. You offer organic food and high-speed free wifi. Although you are the least well located for my client's office of the three hotels, I have always chosen to come here if I can.

But I've had enough. Gradually, you've reduced the standard of what you're offering and gradually your team has lost touch with your guests, particularly in your bars and restaurants. Despite being a frequent visitor, I am not recognised or valued. The sense of value for money, welcome and fairness has slowly but inexorably withdrawn

Take last night in the restaurant. I was having dinner with one of my client's board members. Around us were several well-known personalities. This is a successful restaurant. We had our starter, then everyone in the restaurant waited, waited and waited. I was engaged in a business discussion and, for a while, didn't notice. But then it was clear that the kitchen and waiting staff had been redirected to serve a meal in one of the banqueting rooms and all the diners in the restaurant had been left to fend for ourselves. I complained and eventually service was resumed. The head waiter apologised and did not charge us for our wine.

But why did it happen in the first place? You deliberately diverted resources from your small-ticket, high-margin, high-long-term-value customer to an ad-hoc low-value big-ticket customer. Who is the mad man who made this decision? The customer – your guest - has a choice and I have made mine. I am going to use one of your competitor hotels from now on.

Duty Manager

But madam, surely one night's inattention is not enough for us to lose your custom?

Guest

No, of course not. It's just the last straw. Take the night before in the bar. My friend and I ordered a bottle of wine and shared two starters. The dip with one of the starter was inedible

and the other spicy dip was anything but. We left them and the waitress cleared away without taking any interest and without asking why we were leaving so much of it.

We then ordered a cheese platter. We waited and waited and waited and eventually I got up and went to the bar to chase it up. How difficult is it to assemble and serve a cheese platter? When it was eventually served, one of the three tiny pieces of cheese was mainly rind.

It wasn't like this last time. I had a very good steak and frites. I just get the feeling that you are increasingly taking your guests for granted. Well, if that's the case, I'm off.

And then, to rub salt into the wound, there's the no-show charge. I was booked in from Sunday night for a four-night stay but didn't let you know that I'd only be coming on Monday. On check-in, I was told that you'd charge me for the no-show. I asked that the receptionist take advice from management in the light of my frequent use of the hotel and the huge size of my client's account with the hotel. The next day, I asked what the decision was and was told that the no-show charge was being applied. I said that's a choice you have - and I have a choice too.

I have a choice to use another hotel and that's what I'm going to do. I have a choice to tell my client about my experiences here and I will do that too.

Duty manager

But madam...

Guest

Don't 'but madam' me. This is the first time any member of the hotel team has taken the time to recognise me and my personal needs. Would it be so difficult to recognise me when I come down to breakfast instead of being treated as a bedroom number? Would it be so difficult to welcome me back to the hotel when I check in? After all, I might never have stayed here if it hadn't been for my client's arrangement with you. Would it be so difficult for someone to pass the time of day with me when I am waiting in the lobby? Would it be so difficult to treat me as me rather than as a nobody, a room number or as anyone else?

It's like a dripping tap – turning off a guest happens slowly and away from the headlines. But now that you've turned me off, I'll tell my client so that when the new negotiations for the corporate rate come up, they'll remember this consultant's experience and just perhaps find another hotel to be their third hotel.

And I'll talk and write about this experience. In any case, this guest is off. I have choice and I am exercising it.

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