

Creating positive memories

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Steven Pike, managing director of HospitalityGEM, explains the importance of offering a memorable service to guests, managing consistency across multiple sites, and how operators can maximise the impact of the guest experience, particularly at New Year



Today's consumer is enjoying more choice than ever before when it comes to eating or drinking out but, in turn, this means operators need to be more dynamic to beat the competition. Our statistics show that a third of people are eating out more than they were 12 months ago, with the average dwell time for a meal during the week between one and two hours, and slightly more at the weekend. In terms of spend, the price limit for a drink is £5 for 88% of those surveyed, while the majority of guests are prepared to spend up to £20 for a meal during the week, and up to £30 at the weekend (although many can be tempted to spend more while on site). While a third of people are eating out more than this time last year, the same amount of people say they're not spending any more than they were previously.

This means operators have a limited period of time, and a limited budget, with which to both impress the guest and maximise revenue. They must, therefore, focus on what the guest is going to remember about their experience. This is what will determine whether the site is visited again, or recommended to friends. After they have visited your restaurant, bar, pub or hotel, what are guests going to say to other people? This is more important now than ever before – word of mouth has always had an impact but now, thanks to social media, opinions spread quicker through more networks, to a greater number of people. So if you get it wrong, lots of people are going to know about it, and if you get it wrong a few times, it's going to have a direct impact on your business quite quickly. But obviously the opposite is true too, and the greater the volume of original and positive memories you can generate, the more this will drown out any unfortunate negative content.

To stand out from the competition, it's about being different and original but also giving people an experience that is consistent with, rather than at odds with, your brand. You need to think about the service you offer, and whether this matches your type of operation – personal, attentive service is going to mean different things in different places; if it's a grab-and-go coffee shop, then the customer is likely to demand a quicker, more efficient service than they may do in a fine-dining restaurant. So, understanding and delivering guest expectations is important. But it's not enough in itself.

Imagine the experience as a kind of social currency that the guest can use in conversations – anything that is unremarkable will not be shared, even if it was perfectly acceptable. But if you do something that triggers a positive emotion then the impact can be significant.

Consistency is key

One operator that has built its business around the guest experience is Peach Pubs. They've developed a whole culture around being 'Peachy'. They spend a lot of time determining what makes an excellent host and incorporating this into their training materials, the way that they talk, and how they interact with guests. They're always looking for ways to make the experience as memorable as possible.

Another challenge in managing the guest experience for growing brands is ensuring consistency across all your sites. Failure to do this can result in mixed messages about what your brand stands for. To do this, you need to have an operational framework in place for people to work within. Given the high levels of staff turnover in our industry, getting new people up to speed quickly and preventing bad habits in the more established team is essential.

Having an operational framework does not mean robotic service – in fact, it should mean the opposite. If each team member can carry it around in their heads, remembering what's important and what they need to do at certain points, you start to free up their minds to be more creative and express their personality. That's where evaluation comes in – if people know they're going to be measured on certain elements then it brings this to front of mind as well.

Once you've got this framework in place, it can be used in both training and performance evaluation, both of which should be inextricably linked. By getting regular feedback on how a team is working within your framework, the next step is making sure you've got a culture of continuous improvement. Operators and their teams realise that they won't always get everything right, but mystery guest reports or guest feedback analysis offer a real opportunity to listen, reflect and learn. They should also celebrate success and, where they've created an experience that is memorable (for the right reasons!), recognise what contributed to this and share it to encourage future success. What doesn't get measured probably doesn't get done, at least not consistently, and this represents a risk over a distributed estate.

This is something Prezzo does really well – there's close alignment between the training its staff get and the way they are evaluated and motivated. The company has done that for a number of years and it is part of its culture to reflect and to learn.

So, to maximise the impact of the guest experience, it's about being true to the brand values while remembering that simply delivering expectations is not particularly memorable and generates little social currency for people to use in conversations. Whatever your brand stands for, make sure it's expressed in the way that you manage the guest experience. Usually during a one to two hour experience, there will be opportunities where you can make it memorable – especially so for occasions like New Year's Eve and Mother's Day. While the nature of the experience is going to be different on these occasions, keep the process simple, as you want your whole service to feel effortless from the guest point of view, even though behind the scenes it's more complex than that. Practice and organise role-play scenarios for your staff, and plan for different eventualities. Some nights are going to be quite predictable, others not, and the more prepared you are, the more you can relax and make the experience fluid and enjoyable for both you and the guest.

Consider what you offer

Finally, considering what you offer your guests can impact their experience too; 68% of people said the provision of entertainment would not only impact on how long they chose to stay at a venue, it could be a deciding factor in where they visit.

However, free Wi-Fi is less of a decision-maker; 57% said it didn't impact on where they chose to go, while 76% said it wouldn't affect how long they stayed. But these are generic statistics – consider what they mean in the context of the guest experience for your own brand and target market.

We look forward to reading about the positive experiences of your guests in the year ahead!