

How to satisfy your need for speed

There are ways of getting people in and out of your restaurant quickly, maximising covers and table turn time efficiently, without hurting the guest experience, says Steven Pike



With any eating-out experience, it is vital that customers enjoy themselves and feel well looked after, not least in order to ensure they provide a positive word-of-mouth service for your operation. However, a great experience does not need to mean that people stay in your site for a long time. Indeed, they may not want to; during the lunchtime service, customers may need to be in and out within the hour, while at breakfast they are often likely to be on their way to somewhere else.

Furthermore, as we all know, increased table turns means increased sales. Staff must thus be able to maximise covers without negatively impacting on the guest experience and giving your site a bad reputation.

The immediate consideration needs to be the expectations of the customer: do they want to be in and out of your site quickly, or are they there to relax with friends for a couple of hours? Gauging these expectations intuitively is a key skill your front-of-house team must have, or develop, since the customer's need for a quick getaway or a more leisurely experience will dictate how tightly and in what manner your staff interact with them.

Format

When it comes to evening meals, it is likely that customers will wish to remain at your site for a longer period than at other times of the day. Our statistics show that the average dwell time is one to two hours (although this is extended at weekends), while 71% of those surveyed are more likely to spend longer over a meal if they are with friends. However, this will depend on the format of your operation. You need to think about your long-term strategy and how you want people to use your site. Wagamama and its imitators have done this exceptionally well, by creating a format that encourages quicker meals and more flexible seating arrangements, even at night-time, increasing the number of table turns in any given period of time.

If you want to encourage customers to stay at your site for a good proportion of the night, it does not automatically mean you can only offer one sitting. We suggest planning for two sittings, one early (beginning between 6pm and 7pm) and then one later (beginning between 8pm and 9pm). Staggering these sittings will lessen the pressure on both the kitchen and the front of house, ensuring there is no backlog with orders or bookings and creating a more relaxed atmosphere in your restaurant.

Customers will notice big parties arriving and it could make them concerned that they might be neglected by your front of house team or will have to wait a long time for their food. You may also wish to have a cut-off for bookings to allow for a certain number of walk-ins, so you can scoop up those people who make a decision when walking past.

Manageable

The number of staff on your team, and the training they undergo, is also vital to ensuring efficiency. You need to have enough people on shift to allow front of house to have sections of a manageable size, so customers are served quickly and all upsell opportunities are maximised. You also need to provide comprehensive training, so front of house staff know all the steps of service and when and how to upsell in an appropriate way. You do not want customers sitting with empty plates when they could be on their next course or enjoying a second drink.

Table management software can also help here, as it can provide a real-time status for every table in the restaurant.

When it comes to seeing how effective your staff are at table turns, and how much your customers enjoy their experience, we strongly recommend evaluating your site, or sites, whether that is through mystery guests, customer feedback surveys or another method. These will help you to assess the difficult balance between speedy table turns and an exceptional customer experience and to decide on actions that may improve it.

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Steven Pike is managing director of HospitalityGEM

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