

# 'TIS THE SEASON FOR GIVING GREAT SERVICE!

BY SARA FURLONG

*The holidays and the months leading up to them can be the busiest time of year for the restaurant industry. With parties, travelers, and shopping traffic, you'll be visited by loads of first-time guests so it's important to make a great first impression. To gain new repeat customers, your service needs to be at its best. In this issue of MaineSense we provide insights into how to give great service and keep guests happy during the busy holiday season.*

## MAKE LONG WAITS MORE BEARABLE FOR GUESTS

With all the extra holiday traffic, your restaurant is bound to experience longer wait times than usual. David Maister, who is widely heralded as one of the world's foremost authorities on business and service, provides several insights on the customer waiting experience in his article, "The Psychology of Waiting Lines." Below, we explore these "Maisterisms" and what they mean for your restaurant's approach to handling waits.

### ***"Occupied Time Feels Shorter Than Unoccupied Time."***

If you keep guests busy, their wait time will feel shorter. This is a great reason to hand out menus that guests can peruse while they wait. This also has the added benefit of reducing turnover times because customers already know what they want to order when they arrive at their table.

Another approach to keeping waiting guests occupied is to give them a pager and have them wait in your bar area. Not only does this make their time more enjoyable, it also allows you to make money off of these customers while they wait. If customers can't wait at a bar, offer them some sort of refreshment: infused water, candy, finger food, a small glass of wine - anything. The feeling that they got something for free will add value to their wait and significantly reduce most customers' irritation.



### ***"People Want to Get Started."***

Handing out menus also gives guests the impression that the service has begun, which is a good thing because, according to Maister, guests perceive wait times as shorter once they've received some element of service. Much of the anxiety associated with waiting in line is related to customers' fear of being forgotten. Writing down their name and acknowledging them as soon as they enter your restaurant helps to squash that fear. Therefore, you should always have a hostess on staff to greet guests during busy times.

### ***"Anxiety Makes Waits Seem Longer."***

We've all experienced a time when another guest who arrived after us was served before us. This type of experience makes customers feel unimportant and is a sure-fire way to make them angry and lose their business forever. Don't ever give special preference to certain guests over others.



### ***“The More Valuable the Service, the Longer the Customer will Wait.”***

Perceived value effects tolerance of waits. This fact can be demonstrated by a common restaurant experience: we will accept longer wait times at a fine dining facility than we will at a more casual restaurant. You can use wait time to instill a sense of value in your customer before they are even seated. One great strategy to increase the perceived value of your restaurant and occupy guests is to hire a copywriter to interview your chef and ghostwrite a “letter from the Chef” to customers. Start the letter with an apology along the lines of, “Dear Guests, I’m sorry that you have to wait to be seated, but I assure you: the meal you are about to enjoy will be worth the wait.” Then explain some highlights of the chef’s work that increase the perceived value of the food. For instance, if your chef smokes his own pastrami or procures all of her protein and produce locally, explain this in the letter. Make these letters available to waiting customers.

### ***“Solo Waits Feel Longer than Group Waits”***

Do everything you can to make waiting in line a social occasion. One strategy is to feature interesting conversation-starters as wall décor in the waiting area, or to give guests a card with such icebreakers or trivia questions when you write their name on the list.

*Keep your staff smiling!*



## **DO'S AND DON'TS FOR HAPPY HOLIDAY HELP**

Follow these tips to improve staff morale and keep service standards high during the busy season.

### ***DO show your staff you appreciate them.***

Friendly, attentive service is so important for customer return rates, but during the busy holiday season, grumpy crowds can start to stress out your staff. Be proactive about keeping your staff in a pleasant, positive mindset by showing them that you appreciate their hard work. Whether you offer small Christmas gifts or bonuses or throw a holiday party, you should consider staff appreciation to be a solid investment this time of year because the smile on one server’s face could make the difference between gaining a new repeat customer and having a one-time guest badmouth your service.

### ***DO implement fun contests for your wait staff to incentivize good sales and service.***

For example, whoever sells the most cheese trays or candy cane martinis during the holidays might win a worthwhile prize. This will add a little fun and excitement to their job during an unusually stressful season.

### ***DON'T assign wait staff extra holiday tasks.***

Yes, December is a great month to sell gift cards and promote your catering business, but don't assign these tasks to servers who are already extra busy this time of year. Instead, set up a table near your waiting area to sell gift cards and plan to have one designated staff member who will be in charge of catering sales each shift. This person should be fully educated on your catering menu and offerings and should be provided with forms to collect the proper information you'll need to make the sale later. Compensate this person properly and you'll quickly boost your catering business.