Keeping Your Cool Under Fire: How to Handle Rude Guests With Grace and Dignity

by John Richardson

One of the most difficult things for an owner or manager is being forced to intervene between an unpleasant guest and a server. You want all your guests to be happy, and you do not want to demoralize a server who is doing his or her best, but has had the misfortune of winding up in the cross hairs of a nasty patron. Hopefully, this article will provide some words of wisdom that you can pass along to your service staff so that they can fend off the slings and arrows of outrageous guests, and keep their cool.

That said, there are situations in which the manager must get involved, including when a guest becomes abusive (e.g., uses racial epithets) or is sexually harassing a server. In some cases, abusive customers are a result of alcohol overservice. (For more information, see "Avoiding Dram Shop Liability," in the RS&G Archives.) But for now, we'll focus on the garden-variety, non-threatening but just-plain-rude customer.

Fortunately, Most Folks are Nice

We've all at one time or another been afflicted by the guest who cannot be pleased. Scarce, but sadly not an endangered species, this creature seems bent on imposing misery, both for himself and for the server with the misfortune to cross his path. And few though their numbers may be, any visit from a "guest from hell" will leave an indelible mark on your memory. When that dreaded day arrives, you can attempt to pacify. But be forewarned: The wrath of this beast cannot be soothed by food, drink or even a sunny disposition. Tread lightly. Make no sudden movements, and always remain outside of striking distance. You'll never transform this creature into something warm and cuddly, but if you approach the situation in the right way, you can (most times) at least survive the encounter.

Over a number of years working in the restaurant business, I have realized that there are very few generalizations about the dining public that can be made that will hold water. The exceptions are too numerous. But there is one generalization that I will hazard: Most people who come out to eat want to have a good time. The large majority of the dining public is well-mannered, even-tempered and reasonable. Most of the guests you encounter are not unduly difficult to please and generally easy to get along with. I'd even go so far as to say there are many whom it is a pleasure to serve. But in this case, the exceptions to the rule are particularly memorable, or perhaps more precisely, impossible to forget.

When you have rude guests, before you react or actually do anything, I think it's helpful to keep a few things in mind. First, these guests are the exception, not the rule. Very few people are truly rude and demanding. In other words, maintain a sense of perspective. Those who are rude are possibly responding to something they've experienced in the restaurant. But since nearly everyone
wants to have a good time when they go out to eat, it's useful to consider that something may have gone wrong beforehand when people have a bad attitude. True enough, it's not exactly fair that you have to suffer for something you didn't do, but we're not dealing with what's fair or unfair, we're just addressing how you might approach a bad situation.

Keep in mind; it's (probably) nothing personal. If they're not mad about something particular that happened, maybe this is the way they treat everyone. Again, you shouldn't have to suffer, but reminding yourself that it's not directed at you personally, but at the world in general, should help you keep a sense of perspective about it. On a semi-serious note, it can be quite a little bit of comfort in these situations to remind yourself that possibly they are suffering as much as, or even more than you are.

You do have some control. You, as a server or manager, can in almost all cases straighten out a bad situation. The large majority of people are reasonable and will respond to good-faith efforts on the part of the establishment and staff to make things right. It is the server's ability and competence, in the long run, that affects the way he is treated. It will require effort on your part, but it's almost always possible to "rein in" a runaway nasty attitude by the time you check back after serving the main course, assuming you've been scrupulously efficient.

Finally, the server's attitude and demeanor contribute to the way he is treated, but this is secondary to how well he does his job. Accept the fact that you're going to come across bad attitudes occasionally. They're an occupational hazard, and there's no getting around that.

Why Are They Like That?

Working in a restaurant does not qualify you to be a psychologist; however, if you keep your eyes open, you will learn quite a bit about human nature. Some people are nasty all the time. Some people act nasty because they're having a bad day. Or maybe they are having an argument with their significant other at the meal. Some people think, especially if they are in what they consider a "fancy" restaurant, they are supposed to be a little uppity. Maybe they saw a movie in which the debonair leading man snapped his fingers while calling out "garçon." Perhaps they feel a little intimidated or threatened; they may feel out of place, and are simply overcompensating. Others might be reacting to what they perceived to be a "slight" on the part of some member of the restaurant staff. Whatever the reason for a guest's nasty attitude or rudeness, bear in mind that the job of the server in this position is to take what he or she has ended up with and to make every effort to turn the experience into a positive one for everyone involved.

My point is, there are a hundred reasons why a guest might be or seem rude. There is only so much you can control. And, for the most part, you can't control other people's words or actions. You can only control how you respond to them. Notice that I used the word "respond." It is never necessary to react, but sometimes it is appropriate to respond. The good news is that as the server, you are ultimately in control of the way things happen in your station.

Just Don't Do It

Training teaches us what to do. Experience usually teaches us what not to do. And here are some of the things that you should not do when encountering rude guests.

You're not there to put anyone in his or her place. You're not there to get back at anyone. Neither are you there to be subjected to anyone's abuse. That said, you'll lose every single time if you argue with a guest. Don't return a nasty attitude with more nastiness. This is not a clash of wills or a battle of egos. Service or being a server, after all, requires to a certain extent at least, that you check your ego at the door.
Don't get flustered and make service mistakes. If you make service mistakes, especially stupid mistakes caused by agitation, you'll set yourself up for more grief. Learn to be poised under pressure, and be proud of that ability. Not many people can be truly good servers. It requires a significant amount of class and composure. If you thought you were suffering already, just wait until you slip up!

Don't avoid the table, difficult as it may be. It's likely the last place you want to spend your time, but it's important to prevent them from adding neglect to their list of complaints. Don't immediately offer to "comp" items. Try to fix what's wrong. Most times the experience can be salvaged. At the end of the meal is when it's time to think about what "gesture" might be made to compensate if something went wrong and caused the bad attitude.

What to Do

If there is a problem, solve it. Face it; the guest may have a legitimate gripe, not just a bad attitude. Listen carefully to the complaint. Make every effort to correct what is wrong. If you can't solve the problem, get the manager involved. If nothing is wrong, but the guests just wants to complain, keep your cool and remain in control. You do this by remaining polite and not being afraid to look your guest in the eye. Avoid the natural tendency to raise your voice or speak too fast.

Most importantly, be on top of everything at the table. It's easy in these situations to get distracted by anger, but you must focus. Remember that if you bungle something at this point, you give them additional reason to be rude. Worse yet, if you blunder, you're going to feel bad about yourself, unnecessarily.

If you are losing your cool and have no hope of turning around an unpleasant situation, sometimes it's better to just give the party up. You can normally give the party to another server and then take his next party. Just don't be dismayed to find that a party that has been loathsome to one server will get along perfectly with the replacement server. I think the reason for this is that they likely feel singled out and without allies after having had trouble with a staff member. They know that staff members discuss their parties, especially when there is trouble. They're eager to have an ally at this point and it's as if they want to demonstrate that they are not the problem. It's as if they're trying to make this point: "See, the problem is not with us. We're getting along just great with this new server. It was that other server who was the problem." Result: They are generally enchanted (or claim to be) by server No. 2. By the way, servers are well aware of this and use it to their advantage. They know that all they have to do is to make nice and they'll be rewarded with a fat gratitude tip.

In the end, I think you can draw a few conclusions that will help you to handle rude guests with grace and dignity. Remember that rude guests are very few in numbers. Focus on the big picture. The unpleasant party will be gone in just a matter of hours and truly abhorrent customers come along only once or twice a year. Remember also that there are many reasons that a guest may act rudely. Though they never have the right to be rude, they may very well be justified in being upset. Keep in mind that a guest's rude behavior should never be taken personally. And remember why you're there: to create satisfied guests for the house and put money in the owner's and your pocket.

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