

Corner Booth

The Server Business



By Rex Warren

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A Lesson in Loyalty

"You want to go where everyone knows your name."

As a new member of the faculty of The Hospitality College at Johnson & Wales University Providence Campus, I am privileged to teach our students about marketing, and all it entails. From pricing strategies to creating a service culture, to the different channels you can leverage to speak to your customers and potential customers, to using public relations to help drive your business.

The content of our "Strategic Marketing" course is wide and jam-packed with useful, actionable content. During the course, the students form small groups and create their own businesses, and design a marketing strategy to support them. The results of this are, frankly, impressive. As I reflect on how we are working with our students, there are some things that existing businesses can reflect on and improve on.

In the rush of the daily operational issues – particularly in this current economic environment – where it is all about survival, I think many may not stop and take inventory of all that they have at their disposal to drive loyalty. In addition to the theory, I've been there in practice. At Starwood, we studied, designed, and implemented a service culture training which was based on what we called "the human truths."

This is not new, but it is powerful. Perhaps most powerful among the "truths" is that people need to and want to "belong." They want to be known and recognized. They want to feel a part of a group. So how to translate this need into an advantage for your business?

The advantage that a small, entrepreneurial restaurant or bar has to its larger corporate counterparts is that your customers are probably in your place often. You need to take advantage of that fact by following some basics. First, train your staff to understand that people want to belong. The most pleasing sound most people can hear in a business environment is the sound of their own name. Train your teams to find it out, to remember it, and to use it. Not like a used car salesman who will beat your name like a drum, but to create a feeling of belonging in your establishment.

Welcome your patrons warmly. Talk with them. Listen to them. Listen for common themes, and use that input to drive changes to your business to better serve them. This is where small businesses have a decided advantage. You can make changes quickly. Far more quickly than a national chain - and far more targeted to your customers and their needs or wants.

Treat your associates as you would treat your guests. J.W. Marriott (you may have heard of his little business) believed that if you treat your associates well, they will treat your guests well, and this has been and remains a hallmark of the Marriott organization. They practice what they preach, as do others. It is good advice. You may be the smartest kid on the block, but if your associates don't clearly understand your expectations, and if you don't treat them the way you expect them to treat your guests, you are losing a great opportunity.

In the rush of scheduling, turnover, and juggling the numerous balls that every entrepreneur does, don't lose sight of this "human truth." Set your expectations, walk the walk, and treat your staff as you would treat your guests. Good things happen when you do that. Bad things happen when you don't; whether you are a neighborhood bar or a multinational corporation. The good news for small business is that you can do it easily and often.

Make your shop a warm and inviting place. Learn your guests' names and talk to them. They will tell you what they like and what they don't like. Listen to them and act on it. This is what separates the wheat from the chaff. There are legions of decades old venues (often owner-operated) who got that and thrived, and miles of road kill in the business world for those who did not, and died.

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