



CHECK INN

Mental Health
& Wellbeing in
Hospitality

Dealing with Customers

CUSTOMERS AND COVID-19

Customer service is the foundation of the hospitality industry and can be a difficult job at the best of times. These challenges have only increased through the pandemic, introducing some significant changes to customer behaviours and expectations, as well as the way in which staff and customers interact.

However, as they say, heroes are often born out of crises and although testing, the changing dynamics to emerge since the pandemic may end up strengthening relationships between staff and customers in the future.

ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

So how can we best engage with customers through this time in order to protect the customer relationship as well as staff engagement and wellbeing?

Trust – The way in which we engage with our customers will be remembered long after the current situation has ended. Customers want to trust that they will be kept safe and so it can be helpful to communicate the steps that are being taken to keep both customers and employees safe. This does not just relate to physical safety but emotional safety as well. Look for ways to communicate and visibly demonstrate the hygiene practices that are being undertaken as well as the venue's health and safety protocol, because it's not just about cleanliness but also the perception of cleanliness.

Communicate – The same communication skills that you would use with customers still apply but it can be useful to have strategies to minimise a customer's

frustration. Showing empathy (whilst not taking it personally) is important, but also using language that shows you are on the customer's side, that you are trying to find a solution that works for everyone and that the restrictions are imposed by Government, not the individual venues. Don't underestimate the role of humour as well. Throughout the pandemic, we've heard stories of how businesses have changed their approach and injected humour into their interactions with customers as a means of enforcing restrictions and requirements in a non-confrontational way.

Connect – It can be useful to consider a customer's needs – both primary and secondary – as a way to build a connection. Primary needs are usually the most obvious and might include requesting a glass of wine or change for the pokie machines. But secondary needs are also important to consider – which include the underlying reasons that a customer has entered a venue. This may include the chance for social connection, to engage with friends and family, to have respite and relief from cooking, to provide a break or distraction from the stress of the day. Particularly in situations where it may be difficult to address the primary need if they are in conflict with any restrictions in place, considering the secondary needs of a customer can help to maintain the connection and relationship.

SUPPORTING STAFF

As a venue, there are several things that can be done to support staff to adapt and respond to changing customer expectations and altered work responsibilities.

Engage – the strength of teamwork has never been quite so important. Although staff may not have regular interaction across shifts, create opportunities for discussions in team meetings as a way to debrief, learn from each other and provide support for the emotional labour that is the current reality.

Train – Ensure that staff are trained in the systems and processes before they work independently and provide regular feedback and coaching when customer interactions could be handled differently to get a more constructive outcome.

Explore – Look for opportunities to integrate technology into the way the venue operates. Introducing instant messaging or online groups can be useful for staff to connect, offer support and answer questions, particularly when there are fewer staff working each shift. Other examples of this may include contactless ordering systems, utilising QR codes to access menus, place orders and make payments as a way to adapt to the 'new normal'.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

These questions are designed to prompt team discussion and interaction following the podcast:

- What are the biggest issues that we have with customers in our venue?
- Do we think the pandemic has permanently altered the way that we engage with customers?
- How could we improve the way that we interact and engage with our customers?