

Profit Is Born At The Pre-Shift Gathering

By James Dunne

In my travels, I have the fortune of seeing many restaurants in action . . . both from behind the scenes and from the guests perspective. While the frantic yet controlled pace of a Saturday night in a finely tuned dining room is such an exciting vision to behold, the times which most intrigue me are those valuable few minutes which can dictate the tone of the evening . . . the pre-shift gathering of servers, managers, and bartenders.

There is something special about the moment an enigmatic manager huddles his or her staff together and can singularly set a tone for the service staff to follow throughout the meal. An energetic ten minute start to a shift can make or break the satisfaction of each and every guest who comes through the gates that day or evening. Unfortunately, this defining moment is arguably the most underutilized and oft ignored aspect of management's effect on the success of a restaurant.

My impetus for writing this was a recent conversation I had with a shift manager working for a restaurateur I have been consulting with. After I asked about how the pre-meals were going, he said, "ahh, I don't have time for that." Let me also point out that as I asked this question, it was 5:05pm and he was eating a slice of cheesecake! Rather than dismiss his comment or write him off with a condescending attitude, I wanted to clarify why he felt that way. He explained that the staff only sees it as a lecture and a time to get some free food...usually the specials for that night. With that said, it can now be seen that this is usually the reason why managers avoid pre-meals, and the primary reason why one of my most frequently requested services is to develop pre-meal training outlines and training for restaurants.

Remember, a restaurant managers ultimate function is the satisfaction of the guest. To that end, considering you will not be doing this alone, and

considering your servers and bartenders have the most contact with your guests, you should be viewing management's primary function as the PREPARATION OF YOUR STAFF to insure the satisfaction of each and every guest who comes to dine. One shouldn't forget that managers need to make table appearances and 'touch' the guest as much as possible, helping to insure that they have a great time in your place. But, ultimately, your servers and bartenders are the ones who will have the most influence on guest satisfaction. Qualifying this, aren't they the ones who should now be focused on to provide the tools to help foster a memorable experience for a diner? And what better way to provide these tools than by taking 10 minutes...plus some advance preparation which I am about to outline with you...to get them on the right track.

Here are the key points to remember:

1-Prepare

- Take the pre-meal seriously. Look at it as a performance and probably your best opportunity to make an impact on your staff. Plan what you will say in advance. Have an agenda each and every shift and stick to it. You can stray from the agenda to address immediate issues, but always return to the thoughtfully planned strategy.

*** The strategy I always stick to is as follows:**

2-Rotate

- After putting together a series of pre formatted pre-meal meetings, organize them in a binder. The key rule to remember is that you need to keep them in an odd numbered rotation. If, for example, you develop 15 different sessions, they will never repeatedly fall on the same day of the week. If you give a particular session on a Monday this time, the next time it comes up in the rotation, it will be a Tuesday. This is important if you have servers who work the same shifts week in and week out. This will insure that they get a different topic each week and that they stay interested

- * You can use the same sessions for lunch and dinner. To prevent boredom for the server who is working a double shift, have a different binder for lunch than dinner. You can use the same sessions, just stagger them so that two different sessions are done each day.

2-Make it Brief

- 10 minutes...no more! Be sure to stick to this. You will actually find that

it is harder to keep things brief...and much easier to start rambling. Your best way to avoid this becoming an issue is to stick to item#1 above...be prepared with an agenda which will keep you in the 10 minute zone. Most importantly, you will lose your staff after 10 minutes. Keep it brief. Let them know how valuable their time is and show that you recognize how profitable their time is for both themselves and the restaurant. All the while be sure to stress how important it is to take this time to talk about service...which will inevitably lead to profitably for all.

3-Keep it Positive

- This is not the time to berate the service staff and lecture them on how poorly they are doing things. Keep it informational and keep it interactive. Most importantly, keep it focused. Do not let them stray into the realm of making it a gripe session. Keep the topic focused, and when a server interjects with an issue not related to the pre-meal, point out that the pre-meal isn't the appropriate forum for addressing such issues. Consider having a separate delegated time when they can voice any other issues.

4-Taste Food and Beverage

- You've heard it before, but I'll say it again: How can your staff promote a product they have never tried? I will take a clients menu, and pair each food item with a beverage...beit wine, beer, or spirit. Each shift one or two items will be prepared (one portion of each item is plated by the kitchen for all to share) along with a 1/3 to 1/2 ounce portion of a beverage.

I might pair Oysters with a Citron Martini; a Chocolate Cake with a Port; Wings with a Specialty Beer; or a Grilled Chicken with a Barrel-Aged Chardonnay. It doesn't have to be a full meal. It simply has to be two or three things that pair well together. This is YOUR opportunity to be creative, and display your food and wine knowledge. If you are not comfortable with or you do not have the time to do such pairings, you can have someone else do the pairings for you and you can simply follow the guideline and learn along with your staff.

* Refer to "Service Dynamics - Profitable Hospitality for the New Millennium" or <www.service-dynamics.com> .for pairing information.

In one restaurant I was in, I used to have the line cook who was responsible for the particular item we were tasting come out and talk about it with the staff. This was an INCREDIBLY dynamic empowerment

tool for the kitchen crew, and also a way to develop a stronger relationship between the front and back house, as well as a way for the kitchen crew to have accountability for their work and an opportunity to be recognized. Do these tastings cost the owner? yes. Will your staff be infinitely more confident and knowledgeable of your products...inevitably selling more and increasing store profitability? YES!

5-Role Play

- Role play is a lighthearted and practical way to put the tasting knowledge and service issues discussed to work. It keeps the group occupied, it breaks up the monotony of the staff repeatedly hearing your voice, it lets them loosen up, and it promotes them working together. Pair the staff off and be sure everyone is involved. Try not to single anyone out, and always be sure to group people together where a shy personality will be alongside an outgoing one. For example, say to a server, "Joe, now that we've paired the food and wine, show us how you would promote it to Mary." You can instruct Mary to 'play' a guest. While they might fight it at first, they will inevitably have fun with the process.

6-Keep it Focused

- Have ONE service issue you will discuss each day. While this might seem too simple, it is what will keep all involved and focused, inevitably helping them to retain what you are trying to instill. Yes, you might have several issues or FYI items to discuss, but always try to include at least one service issue. Again, refer to "Service Dynamics - Profitable Hospitality for the New Millennium" for 100's of service issues you can address.

7-Give a Daily Incentive

- I often swap out gift certificates with other local restaurants. Use these gift certificates as prizes for your daily contests. There are several books available which outline games you can play with your staff to keep the atmosphere upbeat, fun, and profitable. "Whoever sells the most cheesecake," for example, just doesn't work. You can also contact me or refer to several books available within the industry to develop games customized to your operation. Prizes / incentives might be: Preferred choice of sidework, preferred choice of stations, choice of a meal, preferred choice of a day off, floating \$10 or \$20 bills, plus so many more.

What follows is the standard outline I've developed for just one day in a

rotation for an operation. You'll see how simple and direct it is . . . all totaling about 10 minutes of time. I hope you see the value and potential benefit for your operation. Good luck!

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