

Finding negatives to create positives

You might be concentrating on the things your customer's love about your business but what about the things that really piss them off? Ken Burgin rounds up the top offenders.

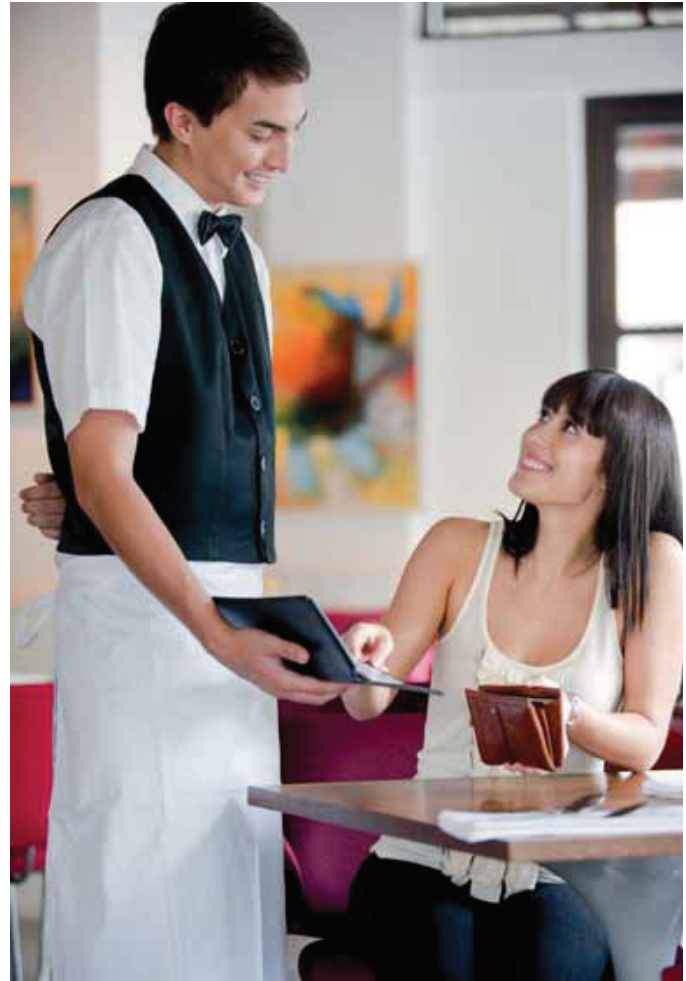


A LITTLE negativity can sometimes be useful: tapping into the very human tendency to complain can yield a whole range of useful material when teaching customer service. A recent workshop on 'quality service' was going nowhere fast: a group of strangers, a cold room and first topic in the morning. So I decided to pop the cork and ask each table to come up with their ten pet hates when visiting a restaurant or café. Specific, not vague and real crimes — not some made up.

Suddenly the room came to life — there's nothing like a little rage to stoke the conversation. The trainer's skill is to use this raw material to look at what participants are doing in their own business and ensure these horrors aren't being inflicted on their own customers. Here are the best (or worst) on the list. Some will be familiar, and a great way to kick off the discussion when you next sit down for a pep session.

Bad coffee. Period. Why has this one item become such a religion? Whatever the reason, the passions are intense and some places are forgiven bad service and scruffy staff if the black gold is made perfectly. When you have great coffee, good service, clean and comfortable surroundings, the combination is unbeatable.

I want to spend money but I can't read the menu. Yep, I wear reading glasses but if I'm dressed to impress I will leave them at home. And if I can't read a description of the \$50 bottle of wine, I'm not likely to order it. Use 12 or 14-point type on the



All smiles when you deliver the right customer experience.

'When a tourist restaurant lists 'vitello tonnato' on the menu with no further description, you know the 'sales prevention officers' have been at work.'



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menu so everyone's happy.

No vegetables with the main course. A puddle of sauce and a wisp of dill don't usually make the meal 'complete'. Call it a hangover from a suburban childhood, but satisfying vegetables add to the contentment of diners. Why leave them out if it annoys people?

No information about the food. When a tourist restaurant lists 'vitello tonnato' on the menu with no further description, you know the 'sales prevention officers' have been at work. This classic Italian dish of poached veal with a tuna mayonnaise is always popular when described with enthusiasm. It's likely that only one in a hundred of your customers speak the language, so the dish won't sell itself without descriptive words.

No hello, goodbye or even a sign of recognition. Have you ordered? Well no actually and I've been sitting here for ten minutes! Sorry...we've just been so busy. Hmm. When staff can't look up from their phone call and nod hello, they may only be capable of doing one thing at a time.



'The toilet is more than just a convenience. It should be a sanctuary, and if you can't keep it clean and fresh, why should I trust your kitchen hygiene?'

If their choice is between talking and working, they usually choose to chat. This one was closely linked to another of the top gripe from thirty-

plus customers — if you're not young, thin and gorgeous, customers may actually 'disappear' for many staff. Hello.

Single people treated as problems. Cafés love them, restaurants don't know what to do with them. Are they really blocking up a table that's needed by a group of four? Singles often spend more, and even small signs of care and attention create loyalty and enthusiasm. We need more customers like that single diner over there, not fewer.

Unisex bathrooms. It's hard enough sharing them at home, why would I want to do this with strangers? How many of these would be designed by female architects? Not very many. This is a special note for trendy new bars.

Rock 'n roll tables and hard chairs. If I'm comfortable, chances are I'll stick around and keep ordering. Don't make it deliberately uncomfortable to make my stay short. The chair is a subtle but powerful signal about comfort and quality.

Music that only a teenage could love. At the workshop, there was plenty of animated discussion about what type of music should be played, and who makes the call on the selection — the manager, the

staff or the customers? But everyone agreed it should add to the experience not upset it.

Scary bathrooms without a mirror, a shelf and a hook. Demanding? Not really. The toilet is more than just a convenience. It should be a sanctuary, and if you can't keep it clean and fresh, why should I trust your kitchen hygiene?

Nothing local on the menu. This is often a sin in areas with great produce and food. Dishing up the same old same old from the freezer doesn't cut it anymore, if you're promoting a quality product.

No website. You mean I have to cross town to visit your restaurant and take a punt on the menu? What have you got against people who use computers, as we all know they often spend more?

Recognise anything on this list? Remember them when trying to improve the overall quality and service in your restaurant and café. Could these be the reason you're not as busy as last year?

Ken Burgin is a leading hospitality industry consultant. To find out more visit profitablehospitality.com or call 1800 001 353.

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