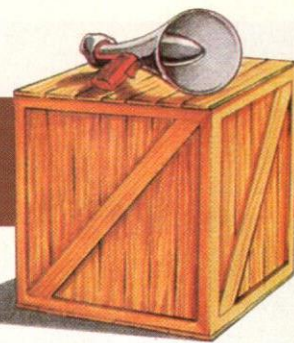
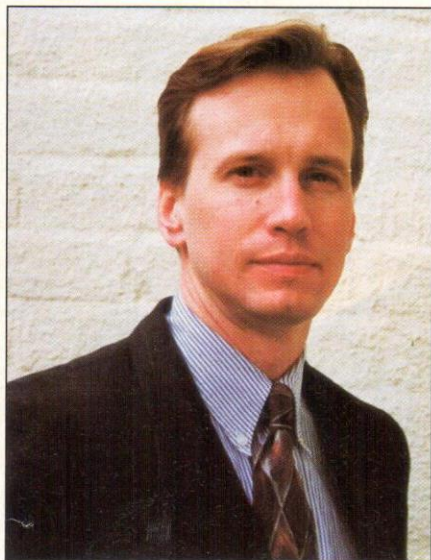


READERS' SOAPBOX



All Contributions Welcome!



AMERICAN SERVICE: HOW DO THEY DO IT?

Robert Duprey has spent 15 years working in US restaurants, from major chains such as TGI Friday's to fine-dining independents. Now working as a consultant in the UK, he asks, where do Americans get their reputation for service?

As an American seeking to offer my services as a training consultant in the UK, I speak to many different people in the hospitality industry. One thing I hear quite often is that the quality of service in American restaurants is generally much better than those in the UK. Although it is certainly possible to experience bad service in the States, it is not so common.

Now, presumably the mechanics of good service are the same the world over, as most of it derives from courtesy and common sense. So why is America's reputation for service so much better than the UK's? And how do American restaurants attain such high service standards from their staff, especially when most US waiting staff are paid just \$2.10 (around £1.35) an hour, or thereabouts?

There are several good reasons. First of all, the average waiter/waitress can depend on receiving a tip. They vary between ten and twenty per cent of the total bill, according to circumstances, but one thing that doesn't vary is the near certainty that a tip will be given. Ask most US waiting staff how much they made at the end of a their shift and the answer would most likely be 13-18% of their total sales.

Which brings me to the second reason: the commitment which most

organisations, large or small, have to the training and development of their staff. Successful restaurateurs realise that if you want to attract, motivate and retain quality staff, you must be willing to teach them the skills necessary to do the job effectively.

Now, when you take the US tipping system and put it together with a commitment to training and development, you have two powerful tools for motivating staff to give great service. With these tools it is easy for waiting staff to understand their importance, and that the better they perform, the more they will benefit. For instance, when waiting staff are trained to know the menu, to get to know their guests and to make suggestions and recommendations when appropriate, they will achieve a higher average spend per table, and consequently, higher tips.

Everybody benefits. The guests win because they receive service from someone who is attentive and enthusiastic. The staff win because they are given the tools to do the job properly, have a higher level of job satisfaction and are rewarded for good service with good tips. The owner wins with a higher average spend and lower staff turnover, because of increased job satisfaction.

Contrast that with the situation in the UK. Firstly, there is undoubtedly a different attitude to tipping here. Waiting staff cannot rely on tips in the same way that their American counterparts do. Secondly, there seems to be an attitude among the UK workforce

that a) you only work in dining room service as a last resort and b) working as a waiter/waitress is akin to being a peasant serf in a feudal kingdom.

This attitude must change. The restaurant business is showbusiness and it is impossible to imagine a show being successful if a large part of the cast has no enthusiasm for the role they are playing.

I'm not sure exactly who's to blame. But I can point to the sceptical (at best) attitude of all but the most progressive hospitality businesses towards training and development. Many claim to have a training programme which is "good enough". But good enough seldom is, and there is always room for improvement. How many establishments train and require their managers to hold daily pre-shift team meetings? Too few, I'm afraid.

Training is an investment in your business, your staff and your customers. It is not a one-off deal but must be consistently administered and reinforced to be effective.

But what about the other point, tipping? Unfortunately, restaurateurs in the UK cannot rely on tips to motivate their staff. But they can develop creative contests, incentives and rewards for staff to aim for.

Restaurateurs who wish to offer great service must be committed to constant improvement and consider new solutions to the challenges they face. When it comes to service, they may just benefit from taking a few pages from America's book.