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as I sat down. Unfortunately, that day I wanted coffee.

Companies are exhorted to "know the customer," which often translates into the compilation of detailed records of individual likes and dislikes. But customers are human beings with moods and desires that change—sometimes by the minute. Our guests want to interact and connect with us as individuals, not as data points from which more data points about future behavior can be extrapolated. We have to assess and understand how our customers are feeling *right now*—and then do whatever it takes to make them feel better.

For example, we instruct our staff to make eye contact with everyone at the table; a guest's refusal to make eye contact may indicate that he or she requires special handling. Waiters are trained to observe the group dynamics. For instance, are the host and another guest who is a self-proclaimed gourmet competing for control? Our waitstaff is asked to look for tension or unhappiness and to delicately ask questions, when appropriate, to diagnose a problem. Sometimes all a guest needs is a chance to vent his frustrations and to know that someone hears him, sympathizes, and cares. We train our waiters to readily apologize for

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Taking the Measure of Mood

by PATRICK O'CONNELL

The Inn at Little Washington, in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, is one of America's most acclaimed restaurants, rated number one in North America by Travel + Leisure magazine and listed among the top ten in the world by the International Herald Tribune. Yet, as co-owner and chef Patrick O'Connell explains, exquisite food is the norm at so many high-end restaurants that serving such fare is no longer sufficient. Like many businesses of all sizes, the Inn strives to provide customers with a transformative experience. Its approach to doing so illustrates what many customer relationship management programs lack.

Recently I stayed at a New York hotel that prides itself on customized service. The first morning, I had breakfast in the hotel restaurant, and I ordered tea. The next day, the waiter brought me tea as soon



When we opened The Inn at Little Washington in 1978, many of our guests were people from the area, and I could personalize the food and the experience based on my knowledge of their individual quirks and preferences. But as we grew, the clientele became more anonymous. So we began training our staff to be keenly observant and sensitive to guests' words and behavior—especially to body language. In the process, I developed some simple techniques for tracking and communicating this information to everyone who needs it.

anything that is making the guest unhappy. He had trouble getting through to us on the phone? We're terribly sorry. The drive took longer than expected? We are so sorry. It's raining? Again, our apologies.

After the guests are seated, the waiter assesses the party's collective mood and ranks it from one to ten. The score is logged into our computer system along with the order and appears at each workstation throughout the restaurant. Our goal is that no guest should leave with a score of lower than nine. If the table is

already in good spirits, we may not need to do anything out of the ordinary. But if the prevailing mood is only a three or a four, the whole team works together to elevate it. The waiter identifies who at the table appears most irritable and treats him with kid gloves. If the husband is paying too much attention to an attractive waitress, we might change servers. In the kitchen, we make sure that no more than a few minutes elapse between each course, even if that means putting one table's ticket ahead of another's. If a guest can't decide between two entrées, we will sometimes send out a taste of the plate not chosen.

With each interaction, the waiter reassesses the table's mood and transmits an update. Only at a five? We might need to send out an extra course. At a seven? Maybe an additional dessert.

As our staff members work together to elevate mood ratings, they develop a wonderful confidence in their ability to handle difficult situations as a team.

Even if a table reaches a ten, we don't consider the experience complete until the guests have had an opportunity to tell us their story—why they have come and what it means to them. That is when a personal connection is forged. Sometimes the nature of the occasion is obvious (a birthday or an anniversary). In other situations, extracting their story can take work.

Not long ago, a woman came in alone and did not interact with anyone. At the end of the meal, I invited her into the kitchen, where I mentioned I had read the book she was carrying. Suddenly her story poured out. Her husband had died recently—he was only in his forties. That

day was his birthday, and because they had always talked about coming here, this was how she had chosen to celebrate the occasion. It was obvious that telling this to someone meant a great deal to her.

Such encounters mean that we are fulfilling the potential of our work. Treating the dining experience as a form of healing is a far more rewarding approach than just selling food.

Reprint F0603F