

Help Your Servers Maximize Their Tips

Professionalism and body language will earn your servers more than praise.

Ron Eaton has been involved in the restaurant industry for 25 years, many of them as a server. He's carried plates to the table and catered to customers in everything from family-style chains with a youngish clientele to the most upscale of eateries with corporate expense accounts. No matter the size or profile of the restaurant, his advice for servers who want to increase their tip size is the same: if you're professional and knowledgeable and present a positive attitude and the right body language, you're guaranteed to earn top tips.



"The server is the interface between the restaurant proprietor and the customer. If you're not professional, no one else will be," he says. The server comprises at least 50 to 60% of the customer experience, making you the restaurant's top customer service representative. If you enhance your diner's experience, Eaton says you should expect no less than a 20% gratuity in an industry where 12-20% is the average. He himself never earned under a 20% tip and often made much more.

"If you add even 5% more to the tips you earn, where tips can represent 75 to 80% of a server's income, you're looking at thousands of dollars extra a year in income," he advises. He also maintains that with 75% of the people you have 100% influence over the size of the tip, while the other 25% will tip you whatever they want, since they already have a fixed sense of how much they plan to tip.

"I've served all sorts of famous people, including (director) Brian de Palma and (actor) Al Pacino," he says. Serving the rich and famous is no different from waiting the tables of "ordinary" diners out for a meal. Your attitude and approach must remain the same at all times, no matter the status of the diner or possible size of the tip.

Top tips to maximize your tips

Here are some of Eaton's techniques to help your servers maximize their tips:

- **Be professional, clean (especially your hands!), and positive in your approach.** Being positive, though, doesn't mean becoming the diner's new best friend. According to Eaton, many people find the "Hi, I'm Kristin, and I'll be your server tonight" approach off-putting and vaguely uncomfortable. "You don't want a friend; it's a business transaction," he says.

- **Consider your body language.** If you're not carrying something to the table, your hands should be in front or behind so you appear engaged in what you're doing. Hands in your pockets or at your side indicate a lack of interest.
- **Don't touch the customer.** Again, Eaton feels this is too personal and can make diners feel uneasy.
- **Be knowledgeable about all the items on the menu.** Diners expect you to be able to discuss ingredients, answer questions and possibly recommend appropriate wines.
- **Anticipate your customers' needs.** Nothing's worse than a server who simply serves the food and then neglects the follow-up visits to the table.
- **Never leave anything in front of an unhappy customer.** Many servers make the mistake of discussing an offending dish with a diner without removing it first. You can easily turn this situation around and not jeopardize your tip by quickly apologizing, removing the item immediately, then returning with a replacement...on the house, of course.
- **When presenting the check to the customer, do it professionally and efficiently.** Many servers offer the bill, then seem to disappear. If the diner is ready to pay, it's your job to take the payment quickly. Says Eaton, "When people want to leave, they're ready to leave, so presenting the bill is critical to the meal. It's the last thing diners will remember about you in the restaurant.
- **Consider the personal touch.** Depending on the type of restaurant, you can add such extras as a happy face or a "Thank You" on the back of the bill. Patrons of family-style restaurants often warm to these personal touches.
- **Continue to educate yourself.** Spending time in restaurants noted for their service helps you become a better server.

As the restaurant industry has changed and become more professional, so too has the role of the server. Being a server, says Eaton, is not what it used to be. "Younger people coming up now are much more professional because of the rising status of the service industry." That professionalism is bound to pay off in higher tips for the best performers.

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