

## How to handle complaints

No matter how much you strive for perfection, you will get customer complaints in your food service operation. How you handle those complaints determines whether or not you alienate the customer or turn them into repeat business. Your servers, who are always on the front line, have an enormous impact on determining this. Here are a few golden rules for handling complaints:

- **The customer is always right.** Remember, the customer is always right. Make sure this becomes a mantra for your servers. The customer is paying the bill and we, as restaurant employees and managers, should do everything in our power to see that the guest's experience is positive.
- **Apologize.** Before anything else happens, you and/ or the server should offer a sincere apology for the mistake and offer to fix it.
- **Respond quickly.** By responding to a problem quickly, you prevent it from becoming a crisis. If a wrong order goes out of the kitchen, fix it immediately; don't make the guest wait in line for his correct meal.
- **Listen.** Make sure you listen to your customer's complain. Show the guest that you are concerned and sincere in offering your apology. Do something to show that that customer's business is important to you.
- **Compensation.** There are many ways to compensate a customer for a mistake taking something off the bill or offering free dessert or a round of drinks are popular methods. If something is spilled on a guest, you should offer to pay the dry cleaning bill. You could also give the guest a free gift certificate for their next meal or send flowers to their workplace or residence.
- **Set guidelines.** Set guidelines for what the server can do to correct a problem. It's annoying for the customer and the server to have to track the manager down to correct a problem. If a customer's soup is cold, the server should be able to say, "Can I bring you another cocktail while I get you another bowl? It's on the house." It's irritating and reflects poorly on the management if the server has to say "Let me check with the manager, maybe we can take something off your bill." By not giving your servers some power in these situations, it tells them that you don't trust them. It also tells the customer that the restaurant cares more about finances than the customer's experience.
- **Give servers a support mechanism.** Even though the customer is always right, make sure your servers know you support them. Don't let your server stand there and say, "No, I'm afraid the chef can't prepare the dish that way," then have a manager step over and say, "Of course the chef can do that." Give your servers consistent dining room rules to follow and make sure your follow them as well!
- **Phone complaints.** If a customer calls with a complaint, do not keep the customer waiting on hold. Write down the caller's name, address and phone number and respond to the complaint in a soothing, courteous tone. Apologize for the problem and offer a solution. Managers should also follow up on the complaint by calling back in a day or so to be certain the situation was handled satisfactorily.

