

How to Get Your Service Staff in Winning shape

by Monica Giuoco and Chris Tripoli

All great performances are a result of training. Consider your front of your house as a timed athletic event. The clock begins running as soon as the first customer sits down at the beginning of the shift and doesn't stop until the last customer grabs a handful of mints on his way to the parking lot. The daily score is measured in guest satisfaction, check averages, and tips.

But winners aren't born, they're made. One of the more important aspects of running a restaurant is training your front-of-the-house employees. These folks are the primary determining factor in gaining repeat customers. A memorable experience as well as fantastic food will almost guarantee a return visit. The front-of-house staff members are a large portion of your marketing; their smiles and attitudes can make or break your business. Every person that is seen or heard —the hostess, wait staff, bartender and even the bussers affect the way your establishment is perceived. Considering their effect on your success, the training of your front-of-the-house staff should be given careful attention.

While you may be nodding your head in philosophical agreement, success is not theory but practice. So how would one set up an effective training program? In this article we will review the critical aspects of a front-of-the-house training curriculum, and more importantly, how to develop your personalized program of training.

Start Out by Hiring the Right People

You can't build a champion team without folks who have the heart and spirit of champions. Skills can be taught and experience can be developed. But every great team starts with raw talent. That said, every position in the house requires certain traits and talents. You can't hire a great busser without understanding what it takes to be a great busser. When interviewing, it is important that you consider every aspect of the position. Formal job descriptions have many benefits, including serving as a list of the performance requirements of the position.

Second, you need to find folks whose personalities and values are aligned with your concept. You must examine the goals as well as the culture within your

company. For a refined atmosphere, you may need a subdued staff that has a strong sense of decorum. If fun is on the agenda, a staff that is lively and outgoing is needed. For both instances, you may feel compelled to ask leading questions that will reveal the true feelings of the individual. If you need a creative staff, the second interview might focus on a project. One restaurant owner, when considering an applicant, simply asks them to do something creative with a paper bag. If your atmosphere is vivid and creative, you may need to employ similar tactics. You must determine, based on your concept, the key personality traits necessary when considering your staff.

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Thoughtfully choosing the individuals you hire will help reduce the dreaded “T” word, turnover. Turnover is a big enough problem in the restaurant industry alone, without

creating an environment that encourages it. According to the National Restaurant Association (NRA), the average tenure for a foodservice worker is 1.6 years, versus 3.2 years in the general labor force. Part of the problem is that many restaurant workers are young and unsettled; however, it's a huge problem for the restaurant industry, and one which the NRA Educational Foundation is trying to understand and solve. In the meantime, you would hate to lose valuable resources, and possibly have your restaurant understaffed because of bad choices you made in the beginning. After years of interviewing it is often second nature to make a good fit; but in the meantime, you must focus on preventing the mistake of choosing square pegs to fit in your round holes. To prevent this you must carefully consider whom you are looking to hire. There are many ways to determine this. Every staff has key individuals within their establishment such as managers and seasoned employees. To determine your goal in hiring you must speak with your managers or a mentor within the industry. Have them help you come to a conclusion on personality traits that will best represent your concept.

You should also use valuable gems within your association, by having group discussions. Many companies have what they call "open forums" during which employees have the right to share personal views that may improve their work environment. These sessions will not only help you to see what did work in the past, but more importantly what did not work. By doing this you might gain some insight into the true goals of your restaurant and avoid hiring the proverbial fish out of water.

Structure is Key

Structure in a training program is so very important. Much like a standardized recipe ensures a consistent product, your procedures in training being standardized will help ensure well-trained employees. With that in mind your program should be almost ritualistic in its frame. This is accomplished through a set standard for training. You must carefully examine the results you seek and create an outline of the items to be covered. Be specific and thorough, but be careful not to overload your future pupils. Training can be held in various sessions; you might want to look at all of the information that is to be covered, then break it up into several well-structured sections. Then you build your program from these outlines.

An important factor to consider is that the items that are stressed by the trainer are the points that will be remembered by your new hires. So be sure that the training is thorough and exact. It is sadly apparent when a company has given little attention to training. Humans have the wonderful ability to reason, absorb and use skills learned. Through careful consideration and planning, your staff can be successful. Bearing that in mind, plan how you will train and avoid the all-too-common "train wreck."

Orientation

The first portion of training is an orientation. Our goal here is to help new staff become functionally directed within their new environment. This is an important portion of the training because at this point you can help them understand the company's culture and expectations. With careful planning you can help draw a mental picture to help new employees visualize their place within this family. It is also important to introduce the company's mission statement. If the employee

understands the goals of the organization it is easier for them to personalize their experience and join the team wholeheartedly.

Orientation is the very first impression that your new hire has of your establishment. This is the perfect time to help them develop their place within your company. Whatever you present as important will stand out in their mind. For example, if it is a requirement that the greeter always smile, then stress that point from the beginning. Let them know the policy of the company and why it is important. Remember, your employees will make a big deal out of things that the employer stresses. Your concerns become their concerns.

It is crucial that you lay out the responsibilities of the position and the anticipated duties of the individual. You should lay out everything from start to finish, specifically covering who, what, why and how. Being clear and concise will be helpful in the long run. Many individuals become frustrated when their job requirements are unclear or undefined. This confusion could lead to the loss of a valuable employee. It is best to simply prevent such problems through clear direction in the beginning.

Formal Presentation

Psychologists have studied the three ways in which people learn: visual, auditory and kinesthetically (learning by doing). These learning differences should be considered when developing your training program. This is easily overcome by incorporating these three factors into the curriculum. It is important that speeches and visual aids are prevalent parts of your formal presentation. Videos are a wonderful tool for teaching. These help both the visual and auditory learners. On-the-job training is usually best for those who learn by doing, so every training program should include a hands-on portion of training. Some restaurant groups have created computer programs that help new employees learn their point-of-sale systems. Such programs enable all three learning styles.

Handouts, including department manuals that outline rules, regulations and miscellaneous duties, are very helpful; these serve as a reminder for future evaluation of job performance. If the expectations of the employer are clearly defined, then there is no question what was covered when the employee received training. It is recommended that an agreement should be in place that guarantees accountability of both parties. This is often accomplished by signing and dating proof of training, and job descriptions. When each section of training is completed, both the new trainee and the trainer sign a form. These should be kept within the employee's personnel file.

A training schedule must be established early within the process and included in the training manual. A concise record of what will be accomplished within each training session should be given to the new employee and this schedule should be strictly followed. Establishing this order in the beginning will demonstrate your dedication to structure and will set an example for new employees. We have found that a successful order of training for service staff will include the following steps.

Orientation. This is where the employee's first impression of the restaurant is formed, and a good time to explain the values, mission, work environment, general rules and regulations, and expectations of the business. This is when you rally employees to work together, share your principles of customer service, and express

your restaurant's commitment to continued training (e.g., weekly service meetings, quarterly product workshops, and staff focus groups for ways to continually improve). This is when employees should learn what is expected of them and what they can expect from their employer.

Menu training. Here, service staff gets its first look and taste of the product, and the opportunity to work with the expeditor to see how each menu item is garnished and presented. They should sit with their trainer and taste the core menu items and sauces. A good review tip is to have trainees quiz each other over the menu descriptions. For group training this can be done with games like "menu jeopardy" or "menu wheel of fortune. A written test covering the description of main menu items, sauces, and garnishments is common.

Bar training. No tasting required! Actually tasting some of the most popular wine list items is a good thing to allow. The trainee needs to observe the ordering, garnishing, and serving process. Review with the trainer the core menu drink descriptions as well as recipes for the house specialties. A written test covering wine basics, and drink ordering and serving procedures is common during this phase of training.

POS training. The trainee can get a lot of POS practice during this step by ringing in the other servers' orders for the bar and kitchen items. Trainee should complete the server checkout procedure and review with trainer all POS operating issues (handling voids, coupons, etc.). A written test of this material is also common. (For more information, see "[Pre-Opening POS System Training Tips,](#)" RS&G Archives.)

Service-follow shifts. The trainee should follow and assist the trainer at tableside with each step of service (greeting to check presentation) as well as with the POS, bar service and food pickup and delivery. At this time, the trainee will complete any side work and check out with their trainer.

Service-practice shifts. At this stage, the trainee does the tableside, POS bar and food service on a small station with the trainer following to assist if and where needed. The trainer will complete an assessment at the end of these shifts. They will do any side work and check out together. A written test over general orientation materials and service-related issues is common at the completion of this step.

At the conclusion of each step, there should be a review of all key points and a short written test for the trainee to complete. The amount of service-follows and service-practice shifts will vary according to the complexity of your concept and ability of the trainee.

It is important that a seasoned employee presents the instruction. You have the responsibility for training the trainer (even if the trainer is you). These individuals are molding the minds of your new employees; you need to be completely confident in their abilities as your trainer. A manager, human resources (HR) representative or a trainer who is well-versed in company policy is often the best choice for this. You might also consider individuals who are ripe for growth within the company. Their experience could be beneficial and might also give proof of their readiness for a promotion. It is important that whoever does the training has the ability to read people. They should watch carefully to ensure that this trainee truly grasps the

information being presented. If there is some doubt, then the material should be presented in another manner.

It is important that the new employee is involved, so ask probing questions to see if the information has been absorbed. (For more information, see "[Creating an Effective Server Training Program](#)," RS&G Archives.)

On-the-job training is vital but tricky. You must be careful when such training is to be scheduled. It would be foolish to schedule training hours on the weekend when an establishment's atmosphere would be harried. This would not be conducive to learning, there would be no time for questions and the trainee would become frustrated. It is advantageous to choose hours that are less busy to enable questions and individualized attention. This one-on-one training should last as long as reasonably required (typically three to seven shifts) and must be outlined within the training schedule.

Group Training

Another form of training that deserves attention is group training. It takes many employees back to the comfort of days spent in school. Group settings are quite conducive to learning because there is less pressure on the individual. In these settings there are always points that some might not have considered. Differing situations of individuals often bring a new perspective to the table. Consider those who are younger; they have a fresh perspective on their future. Young ones often have the strength and initiative that stoke the embers of others that might be suffering from burnout. Fresh ideas tend to inspire others. Consider, too, the experience of ones that have worked many years in the restaurant business; these seasoned workers are often a fountain of knowledge, overflowing and ready to share with the inexperienced. A group setting allows a mixture of individuals from varying ages and background that can lead to personal growth.

Group settings create many opportunities for activities. Such teaching sessions lend to open discussions and problem-solving exercises. Breakout sessions are very helpful teaching aids because they challenge the employees before the situation arises. An existing issue can be presented to the group, with opportunity to offer suggestions to overcome the issue. You would be amazed at the solutions presented that were beyond your imagination.

You may have great success with group training on such items as menu item descriptions, bar specialty drinks, wine list, and suggestive selling techniques. Some restaurant owners have employed a team-building approach to this phase of training, whereby one team competes against the other. The team that is able to describe the must-win items correctly wins prizes. Creating involvement in the process is essential, and competitions like this are enjoyable exercises that allow the staff members to be involved in their training.

Continual Training

Once the initial training period has been completed, the ongoing training begins. It is important that your new employees understand that there is no finality to training. As a manager you should never underestimate the power of reinforcement. We all

need reminders of basic principles and duties that can slip by unnoticed. As a manager or owner it is your duty to stay on top of every aspect of your restaurant. Daily preshift meetings are useful in emphasizing the importance of continual training. Before opening, a meeting can be held to cover the daily specials. This is also a good time to address service issues. For instance, appetizer sales may be suffering, and as manager you may know of an individual who excels in such sales. You might ask him to demonstrate how he uses suggestive selling. Allow him to be the star of the moment so that others might improve. A good preshift meeting is one in which the service staff participates as much as the management. We suggest calling on one person to demonstrate a proper greeting, another to describe the daily special and have another suggest a wine for it ... the others will add their comments, creating a situation in which the staff is involved in the daily information and motivation session.

Along with daily preshift meetings, monthly and quarterly meetings can be held to address service and product issues that may require some attention. This is the time to discuss what the staff is doing well, and commend them for their efforts. Keep in mind that this is not a time to counsel individuals, but rather a time to encourage and instruct. You should carefully consider your words in order to commend employees for what they are doing well and make recommendations for improvement. If there are problems with an employee, this is not the time to handle the issue. Always give counsel in private; public embarrassment is detrimental to the morale of your staff. Just keep in mind how you would feel in the reverse situation.

The restaurant industry is in a constant state of growth and change. Diet trends and interests change as frequently as today's fashion. It is vital to be a step ahead of trends such as the "low carb" lifestyles. It is necessary for your staff to be aware of potential roadblocks and learn how to overcome hurdles. Through continual training your staff can be made aware of food alternatives available on your menus. It is not difficult to develop small group sessions that will benefit your patrons and in the long run, your restaurant.

Continual training is the backbone of a fine establishment. If your staff is continually learning and growing then your restaurant will only improve. As manager, it is important that in this aspect you lead by example. You must search out ways to help your staff improve and take a role in the learning process. Your staff will always look to you for guidance; therefore you must be a beacon that will calm them in the storm.

Consistent training helps to ensure that your staff is comfortable and confident. This is a concept known as, competent confidence. Competent confidence is achieved when your staff is properly trained. Your goal in service staff training is to help your staff learn the necessary skills and help them put these skills into practice. The result is a staff that is comfortable applying the knowledge they have acquired. This progress is possible through careful planning in hiring, proper orientation and continual training.

-- [Restaurant Startup & Growth](#)

Seven Steps for Developing Your Service Staff Training

Learn from your previous experience. Consider what has worked for you in the past and use that approach. Also, consider what did not work and discard those practices..

- **Choose the right person for the position.** Carefully screen all individuals to ensure a perfect fit. Starting out correctly might help prevent the loss of valuable resources.
 - **Research various references on how to better train staff.** There is a great deal of information published every year to assist in every aspect of the restaurant business, including Restaurant Startup & Growth magazine.
 - **Turn to trade associations for information.** The National Restaurant Association is an organization that is dedicated to assisting both small and large restaurants. There are many state restaurant associations as well that can provide much information on how to effectively train your service staff.
 - **Look to the "key people" within your company for assistance in establishing a training program.** Managers, mentors and seasoned staff members are all valuable references. Using these resources can help you to hone your training program.
 - **Develop a checklist, for interviewing and training purposes.** There are so many things to keep track of in the restaurant. Don't try to commit them to memory.
 - **Develop a plan for continual training as well.** Never forget that your staff is constantly learning and there is always room for growth. Involve staff in your daily preshift service meeting as well as the monthly (quarterly) product seminars.
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The Interview Process

There are many things to consider before you begin the interviewing process. Advanced preparation will ease the process and set the tone for all of the interviews. Consider these steps before you begin interviewing for your restaurant.

- **Gather all of the information concerning your staffing needs.** Come to a full understanding of the needs of each department, host, wait staff, bar, and busser.
- **Prepare the environment in which the interviews will be held.** Choose an area that is well-lighted and has less of a chance of interruptions. Notify your staff that you will be interviewing.
- **Arrange for someone to help in your absence.** If you make yourself indispensable in the process, it will come to a screeching halt if you are unable to make it to work.
- **Create an allotment of time per interview and set limits on the amount of interviews to be done.** Unplanned and unlimited interview periods can drag the hiring process on forever, and give the impression to the employee that the restaurant is inefficient and disorganized.
- **Review each application before the interview and arrange the applications for easy access of information.** Be sure to examine these

applications and look for any indications that this is the right person for the position.

- **Set up a system of checks and balances for all steps.**
- **Develop and use an interview checklist and rating form.**