

# The power of service quality: front-of-house service skills

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## 23.1 Introduction

It will be naïve to think that anybody who makes a decision to walk into a restaurant holds only the intention to satisfy the basic needs—the need for food and drink. The consumers in today’s world are becoming even more sophisticated and educated in the way they choose a product or service; they have broader experiences with food service operators and have developed a more varied palate and wider tastes in food and beverages. Together with the intrinsic desire to seek out new culinary experiences, the competitive pressure from different food service providers competing on different basis, and the emerging substitutes for restaurants (for example, home cooking and dining in as a modern quality lifestyle concept), the

bottom line is that customer expectations are growing and they are getting increasingly difficult to impress.

Indeed, these customers are looking for a dining “experience,” and it is people, the servers, who will bring this experience to life. One could imagine the dining experience as a theater performance, where the diners are the audience and the service personnel is the cast. The restaurateur will come up with the concept for the dining establishment, the interior design will give the space its intended vibe and atmosphere, and the chef will create a scrumptious menu. Once these are done, the imaginary theater is built and a good show will rely on the people on stage, the servers who will deliver the service, to set the right balance of “rhythm, timing, and flow” of the performance. To deliver pleasant and memorable dining experiences in the contemporary epoch, service quality plays a significant role with equivalent importance as delectable meals. This chapter will explicate the meaning and spirit of service quality and provide practical guidelines on good service practices for frontend operators.

## 23.2 Service and service quality

The meaning of service has been widely studied and interpreted. It brings out that the activities of a food service business are not limited to the production and provision of food and drinks but a large part of it consists of a hospitality or service component.

“Services are those separately identifiable and essentially intangible activities that provide satisfaction of wants, and are not necessarily linked to the sale of a product or another service”. *Stanton (1986)*

“An action or an activity which can be offered by a party to another party, which is basically intangible and cannot affect any ownership. Service may be related to a tangible product or an intangible product”. *Kotler (1997)*

It is not an understatement that the survival of a restaurant operation of any scale relies heavily on returning or repeat customers, and its service quality dictates the business’ lifeline. While good service adds significant value to a business that translates into profitability through higher margins, poor service comes with a huge cost. Ron Kaufman, a service guru and author of “Uplifting Service” (2012) who had worked with the workforce in Singapore in cultivating their customer-focused service mindset in the years 1985–2010, when the country was transforming itself from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, said poor service can “mess things up” even when the product is great. Indeed, when put into the context of a food service business, excellent service can make up for bad food (at times) while the vice versa may not be so true. In most cases, it takes only one negative service experience to lose a customer—forever—even when food is exquisite.

*Pine and Gilmore (1999)* argued “there is a need to provide the customer with a memory of an experience that they can take away with them rather than just a good product or service.” Quality service has that magic power to transform an average meal to a delightful and remarkable experience or turn around customer anger to customer loyalty.

The Restaurateur who provides great service and value has a competitive advantage over those operators who do not. *Stevens et al. (1995)*

On the contrary, the biggest cost linked to poor service is paid when negative reviews and word of mouth spread through social networks faster than any good words and exciting news about the business resulting in unpredictable lost in revenues and damage to the brand and reputation. In this perspective, the restaurateur is placing high stakes on its frontend service staffs who directly contact with the customers, while their service quality will impose influential effects.

Broadly speaking, the more upscale is the dining establishment, the more expectations a customer have in receiving quality service. But how should we measure quality, when quality is a complex, subjective concept, more difficult to precisely define and measure than in physical goods. We may at least attempt by saying that, in a broad sense, quality service in a sit-in restaurant does not mean providing food at the fastest possible speed, but rather involves delivering food at the right time desired by the customer, at the desired temperature, with the desired layout of tableware.

Parasuraman et al. (1985) had developed a conceptual model called “SERVQUAL” to measure service quality in a restaurant using five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. These are referred as the determinants that put quality in service. Customers form their expectations by gathering information through word of mouth, past experience, marketing communications, personal needs, and desires for the service or product they will experience (Fig. 23.1).

In determining quality, customers compare their expectations about a service with the overall quality they perceive to have received during the actual service. Following the model, if the restaurant’s service performance meets or exceeds these expectations, then they will have a happy, satisfied customer who will feel they have received “quality.” If perception of the service received does not match the expectations, then there is a gap between customer expectations and satisfaction level. When this happens, that is when the customers will turn to competitive products or service.

Following this definition, quality can occur at any level of service, as long as expectations of that level of service are met. Food service operators, from fast food restaurant to fine dining, who understand quality service are those that endeavor to close the “gap” to achieve customer satisfaction by matching expected quality to perceived quality (actual service).

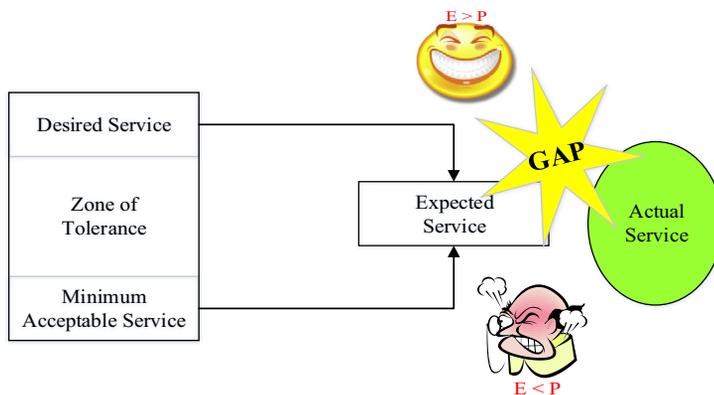


FIGURE 23.1 Service and service quality.

However, the fact is that even if expectations are met, customers may still go to new operators—there is nothing to lose. To pursue excellent quality, restaurateurs should look to exceed expectations, by giving what would surprise and what would be desired and not just what is expected.

### 23.3 Managing service quality

The advantages of quality service are evident—competitive advantage, long-term customer loyalty, reputation, and increased profitability. When the benefits are so great, why few food service operations become champions in delivering service standard consistently? And why problems as a result of negligence in customer service are notable in so many food service operations?

It is easy to discuss hospitality, but to practice it consistently is never an easy task. The characteristics of a service operation have restricted the food service industry from adopting a “pure” product-manufacturing operation process. This provides insights into the many challenges for food service operations at achieving quality consistency in their level of service. [Lamb et al., \(2011\)](#) suggested that service has unique characteristics, which differentiate it from a product: intangibility, involvement, inseparability, perishability, and heterogeneity. Let us understand each one of these characteristics and their specific implications for food service operations below.

Intangibility: We know diners seek for an experience. “Meal experience” as a term was first introduced by Campbell-Smith in 1967 but fast became the buzzword in the food service industry. Unlike some other industries, the food service operation has a production unit consisting of a product (i.e., food and drinks) and a service performance. [Fig. 23.2](#) shows the

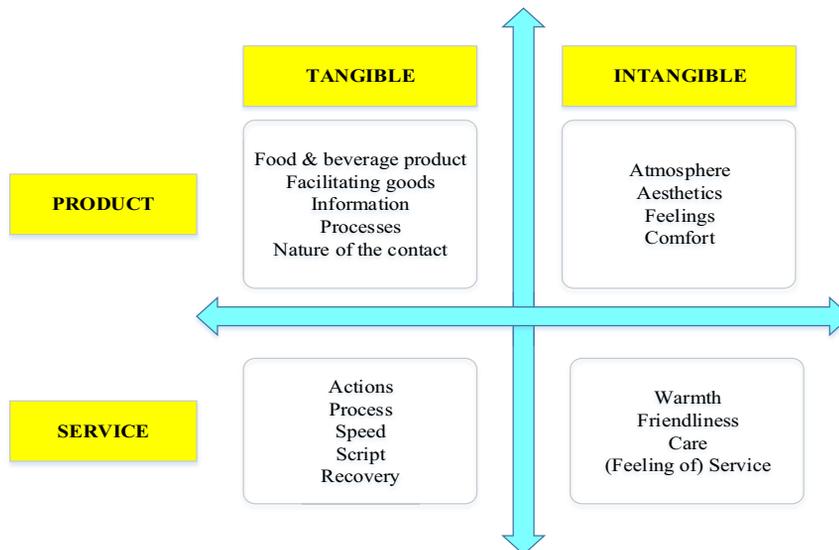


FIGURE 23.2 The product/service matrix. Source: Adapted from Davis, B., Lockwood, A., Alcott, P., Pantelidis, I., *Food and Beverage Management, fifth Edition*, P.334.

product/service matrix as in a dining experience characterized by a customer's encounter of the restaurant's products and service, both comprising of tangible and intangible factors.

The service aspect of a food service operation is largely intangible. Service is not something that can be seen, listened to, or touched. It is therefore difficult to quantify, measure, and evaluate service. An operator can measure the speed at which food is delivered to the table, listen and evaluate the effectiveness of a customer service script, or set out service actions and delivery procedures and see and assess how closely they are followed. However, neither the operator nor its customers will be able to tell service crew the exact level of warmth, empathy, and friendliness needed and desired in every single service encounter when the evaluations of these qualities can be very subjective.

Even the very tangible elements of the food service operation possess intangible factors, such as the atmosphere created and felt, esthetics of the food, which affect the interaction between the operator and the customers, and the perception of service quality delivered. It is easy to imagine that a service operator can control the tangibility factors. However, the intangibility part is often regarded by the customers as just as, if not more, important.

**Involvement and inseparability:** In a food service operation, the customer participates and is involved in the provision of the service (e.g., when the customer selects and orders a food item on the menu) that is consumed at the same time as it is produced. The customer may get personalized services according to his/her specific needs, but it also means that satisfactory service delivery depends on positive customer's participation that is voluntary and this is difficult to control.

Service cannot be taken away for future consumption or enjoyment. Both the service consumer and the service producer have to be present for service provision and consumption that are inseparable and happens almost if not simultaneously. Imagine that in the food service industry, the ingredients for meal can be purchased, prepared, cooked, served, and consumed within a day or even a few hours. The very little or absence of time interval between service production and consumption adds difficulties in managing consistency in service standards.

**Perishability:** Service is highly perishable, cannot be stored, and has virtually zero shelf life. In the context of a restaurant business, a vacant table during its operating hours means potential revenue lost forever. Unlike manufacturing physical goods, service cannot be produced ahead to the time of demand and stored, making it more challenging to implement control procedures and quality management.

**Heterogeneity:** Service has a large measure of human factors. As service in the food service industry is dominantly an activity performed by human beings and not machines, the standard of performance of a service staff may vary from day to day and from customer to customer. This characteristic of service allows service staff to modify the service according to the needs of a customer as every customer is treated as an individual with different needs and desires. On the downside, it is difficult to ensure consistent quality from a service member and even more so to avoid irregularities between service members in the service delivery process. This, however, directly affects what the customers receive. The food service industry is a demanding industry generally characterized by long, irregular working hours including working weekends and holiday seasons, comparatively lower wages, high pressure, and heavy workload. These unfriendly industry conditions do not make managing human resources and maintaining service quality in a food service operation easier.

### 23.3.1 Frontend service skills

Remarkable service requires a lot of tact and attention to details. Too much service will make customers feel demeaned, while inadequate service will make customers feel being neglected. The typical common vision of basically all catering organizations is to provide high-quality “catering products and services” to customers. As a restaurant operator, your “catering products and services” should provide the kind of experience to your customer that can satisfy both their physical and psychological needs, i.e., hunger and experiences.

The frontend operators, who can be waiters, managers, public relations officers, and even chefs, are usually described as “the first point of contact” for arriving customers. They are therefore regarded as the staff responsible for creating the first good professional impression on customers—remember, as a frontend operator, you represent your restaurant!

Customers may come to dine at your restaurant for pleasure, experience, or simply because of hunger. A true understanding of this may help you, as a professional frontend operator, provide the highest-level personalized customer services. You should be people-oriented and customer-focused. You should always feel happy and ready to assist or even solve problems for your customers. To perform these duties effectively and efficiently, you are expected to have good listening and communication skills and here lies the important role of language ability in communication. In fact, it is always highly desirable that you are able speak more than one language or dialect. You do not have to be perfect in each one of them. Sometimes, being able to greet customers in their native language is already good enough to “shine” your professionalism and great attitude toward work.

#### 23.3.1.1 *Communication skill*

What does effective communication mean? It implies being able to get a message across from one person to another successfully. It is always “easier than done” because communication looks like a very common thing to most of us. This might be the reason why on rare occasions would a person pay close attention to how they could make continuous improvements on this. However, having a true understanding of effective communication skills will provide you with a personal motivation to proactively identifying your customers’ needs so as to build a good rapport with them. A frontend service operator often meets with people face to face or over the phone. Most often you will be asked questions by your customers and you might have to keep on responding to the same questions. As a professional, every question should be treated as if you encountered it for the very first time. With this mentality in mind, it is very likely that you will be able to derive constant satisfaction from your work, which will maintain your growing enthusiasm about your profession.

In terms of communication, one of the main duties is to answer phone enquires. There are high expectations that they should handle telephone calls efficiently. For example, when you are taking down the full name of your prospective customer at the time of taking a table reservation, it is advisable that the phonetic alphabet be used to avoid possible mistakes in the spelling of their name, which is generally regarded as a kind of “must-avoid” error in front desk operations.

When communicating with customers over the phone, you must note the following:

1. The caller cannot see you because this is not a face-to-face interaction. They all rely on your voice to decide whether you are a professional.

2. You must always clearly identify your restaurant and yourself when answering at telephone call.
3. The phone connection might not be good enough and therefore it might be difficult to hear or understand the caller.
4. Try to understand or have empathy that the caller has a need and reason for calling.
5. You actually represent your restaurant each time when you answer a telephone call.
6. Note that if the call is not a toll-free one, the caller is paying for the call.

If you can truly understand and bear the above important points in mind, you will always find yourself in position to keep improving your communication techniques.

### 23.3.2 Guidelines on good telephone skills

1. Always answer your call with a greeting: Good Morning/Good Afternoon/Good Evening. Remember to greet the caller in a polite manner. Answer the call within three rings, or for consistency on the third ring.
2. Always identify your restaurant. Otherwise, the caller will not be sure if they have dialed the correct number or place.
3. Always identify yourself professionally: "This is John speaking. How may I help you? What can I do for you?"
4. When speaking on the telephone, make sure you speak politely. Also, pay special attention to the speaking tone you are using because your tone will tell the caller whether you are in a positive position to help.
5. Because this is a telephone conversation, make sure you speak clearly and slowly, should the connection or transmission appear not as good as desired or expected.
6. Because the customer(s) over the phone might not be familiar with the catering industry, you should avoid using jargon or technical terms should your guests find it hard to understand.
7. Make sure you listen attentively, which is the first and foremost thing to achieve in what we always call "effective communication."
8. Ask the caller for his/her last name politely and remember it. Try to use it at appropriate intervals to show your respect to the caller.
9. Take down important notes where necessary.
10. Make sure you understand the caller's request and then offer appropriate assistance.
11. Always end a telephone conversation in a professional manner by using some polite words and expressions such as "Thank you for your call" or "Have a good day," etc.
12. Remember to always hang up after the caller has done so.
13. A concluding remark: "Smile" through the telephone conversation!

#### 23.3.2.1 *Knowing your "catering product"*

Remember, when we refer to "catering product," it means much more than the "food" or "beverage" itself. It extends to include other unique "features" of your restaurant. For example, the location of your restaurant is considered as part of your catering product. Your restaurant can be the vicinity of local tourist attractions and therefore it may be this particular "characteristic" of your restaurant that has attracted a particular group of

customers. So, by familiarizing yourself with the restaurant you are working at, you will have a good knowledge of the “product” you are selling. This will certainly help project your professional image. So, what and how much do you need to know about your restaurant to be able to demonstrate your professionalism?

1. Make sure that you can accurately describe the location of your restaurant. You can do this by describing the distance to the airport, ferry terminals and major sites and buildings, neighboring landmarks, average travel by taxi, etc. Also, ensure you know all modes of transport to your restaurant.
2. Ensure that you can readily provide the address, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail address, and website of your restaurant. Be sure you know the area code of your country or city.
3. Because you might need to always communicate with your prospective customers about the types of food your restaurant offered, you should make sure you know the different dishes and their unique flavors. More importantly, you have to make sure you know and able to describe the chef recommendations, set meals, special promotion, operation hours, and restaurant rules and policies (e.g., whether smoking is allowed, if minimum charges apply to private rooms, charges on food and beverages brought in by customers).
4. Double check whether you have a good knowledge about the beverages offered: wine, beer, soft drinks. You should also ask yourself whether you can tell the name of chefs and if sommeliers are available.
5. Make sure that you know the availability of tables, private rooms, and availability for functions and events.
6. Make sure that you know what types of payment method your restaurant accepts, for example, local and foreign currency, credit cards (Visa, MasterCard, American Express, UnionPay, JCB, Diners, travellers’ checks). You should also be able to give accurate information about your reservation policy, such as waiting time, cancellation policy, and no-show policy under a guaranteed reservation. For example, waiting time is normally 15 min from time of reservation.
7. Ensure you know the different services and facilities offered by your restaurant, for example, whether your hotel provides such services as valet services or pick-up service from the airport or ferry terminal; whether your restaurant has handicapped accessible facilities or wheelchair access, etc.

#### 23.3.2.2 *Do’s and Don’ts*

1. Always acknowledge your customers with polite greetings and good eye contact.
2. Always maintain good eye contact with your customers when serving them.
3. Always mention your customer’s last name at least three times in one encounter.
4. When you hand an item to or receive it from your customer, always use both hands to demonstrate professionalism.
5. Always show a natural smile on your face. Good emotional quotient plays an important role in the service sector, especially when you come across a situation where you may need to deal with difficult customers.

6. Always appear well groomed. Remember, you are always supposed to project a professional image on behalf of your restaurant.
7. Always learn how to strike an appropriate balance between providing quality services to customers and complying with your restaurant policies. For example, customers must not smoke in a smoke-free restaurant. In a situation where you see a guest smoking in front of you, think about how you should deal with this in a professional manner.
8. Ensure confidentiality, privacy, and security.
9. Never have any “casual talk” with your colleagues when you are on duty, especially when you are serving a customer. You will look very “unprofessional” if you do this kind of thing when there is a customer in front of you or being served by you.
10. Always use the employee entrance when entering your restaurant.
11. Always remind the customer of the cancellation policy of your restaurant when a customer has chosen to make a guaranteed reservation.
12. Always learn how to “control the encounter” when serving your customers. One effective way of achieving this is to “do the asking” so as to proactively identify customers’ needs, thereby providing them with a “Vow” staying experience with your property. As a frontend service person, you are not supposed to take a passive role in a service encounter. Taking a passive role in a service encounter may project an undesirable image that you are not enthusiastic about your work. More importantly, this may go against our common principle and practice of “courtesy” in the service industry.

Customers are always demanding but not difficult. Staff needs to be highly technically skilled, when one key to success is—empathy—to look at things from the perspective of the customers—focusing on the person, on settling the person’s emotions first, and on understanding the customer’s feelings and not rushing to resolve the situation. Servers should be trained to identify behaviors that indicate a service need or to predict a service need. Many scholars have studied the psychology of service to satisfy customers by satisfying their self-esteem and in pleasing the persons being served.

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## 23.4 The way forward

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A restaurant looking to meet or even exceed customers’ expectations will achieve a “win-win” situation and in doing so will establish the reputation of an establishment. Constantly meeting these expectations reinforces that reputation but, before being able to do so, it is necessary to identify what the customers want in terms of service—e.g., what are the levels of service expected, the behaviors desired, the target market demands, the service features that are seen important by different segments such as young couples, families with children, retirees.

In hospitality, the term “moment of truth” refers to an instance of contact between a customer and the service provider that adds up to form a continuing impression on the customer. If any of the moments of truth fail an expectation—service gap develops, meaning there is a service shortfall and a negative impression is formed. In a dining experience, examples of moments of truth include table reservation, greetings and customer seating, menu

presentation and dinner ordering, table service, after-dinner upselling, dinner quality, quantity and presentation, bill presentation, and more. Understanding the moments of truth that are important to an operation's target customers is the first step toward offering good customer service. Service provider leaders also believe that excellent service begins with people with a right attitude. Service-oriented attitude drives hospitable behavior. Managers can reinforce positive, desired service behaviors and correct negative ones through well-designed training and appropriate reward schemes. Yet, attitudes are something difficult, if not possible, to change.

The restaurant business is a people business. Those working in the front of house must be genuinely passionate about serving people. The service team, as an "immediate interface" for the food service operator and its customers, is at the heart of the success of any food service operation. Yet, service personnel are often not regarded as high-status employees. They are described as filling "boundary spanning roles" (Bowen and Schneider, 1988) and "subordinate service roles" (Shamir, 1980).

In recognition of the difficult role of a service operator, Bowen and Schneider (1988) highlighted the importance of careful selection of "people with a predisposition and a motivation to play the role in an appropriate way" as one of the key approaches toward service operation success. They also suggested that staff training, development, and socialization is one of the top priority duties of the management in a quality-focused establishment. Managers must train, supervise, and support service staff in the development of their technical skills and interpersonal skills, among many other skills and knowledge, to provide service in a hospitable way that will win and keep customers. Gardner and Wood (1991) also mentioned on the importance of getting the right people to do the right job. They say that new staff in a restaurant that has a vision of hospitality should be selected for their personality traits and not their basic skills, be it culinary or service-related skills. On the other hand, some restaurateurs will say that their method of selection is simply somebody who can smile at himself/herself.

Managers also have the duty to set out a clear order of service outlining the standard service sequence servers should follow in performing certain duties within their individual operation. The order of service will provide a framework for service standards consistency; the service procedures will help enhance the esthetics of service while promoting productivity and safety. They are a code of service that will guide all service members, although they should not be followed as rigidly and blindly as in a way that will impose inconveniences and discomfort on the customers.

In reality, it is impossible to directly manage the thousands of individual actions and interactions that a front end service operator engages in with a customer in a day-to-day operation. From the perspective of management, service personnel should be empowered appropriately to allow them to respond to situations instantaneously using his or her own judgment and ways of doing things in satisfying the customer's needs in a timely manner. Empowerment leads to motivation for service performance especially for those employees who are driven by intrinsic satisfaction. In promoting a culture of hospitality, a friendly manager will set a positive role model for the service team. In many cases, many food service managers are increasingly seen to be moving away from the traditional authoritarian approach toward embracing a management structure characterized by fewer levels of hierarchy. Conducting regular customer surveys and actively seeking opinions of front-line personnel will help uncover hidden service areas that need improvement.

The use of technology such as computerized order placing system is also getting popularity in modern restaurants. The system reduces unnecessary runs to the kitchen to check orders so service staff can be stationed at the front of house to provide uninterrupted attention to customers. It also helps reduce stress due to interdepartmental conflicts by reducing direct contacts between the chefs at the back of house and the service members, who have “different roles, different values, and, in many cases, different genders.” All these to some extent go toward ensuring quality service for the customers at the end.

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