

WANT A BETTER RESTAURANT?

5 THINGS RESTAURANTS NEED TO CHANGE



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THE BUBBLE

Word on the street is that the restaurant bubble is about to burst. Don't panic. It's not going to be that bad for some restaurants. The real question to ask is, "How did we get here and how can we fix it?"

Perhaps in our quest to open more restaurants and fulfill the need to be bigger, faster, and offer more options, we lost our way a little? Maybe, just maybe, we have diluted our industry. There is a huge outcry for sweeping political change which came to fruition with the inauguration of the new president. Change is here whether you like it or not.

Restaurants need to change, as well, if they wish to survive the economic storm coming. If you don't think big changes are coming to the restaurant industry then you are in a state called denial. You can ignore the warning signs or you can change course. Let's explore five ways restaurants could change that will have a long-term positive impact on our industry.

1. How We Treat Our Vendors

Since salesman first started selling food to restaurants, there is always been a love-hate relationship between food vendors and restaurant owners. The major problem is that most the time it is purely a figment of imagination. It's a paranoid mindset that actually is hurting the restaurant owner long-term. How we treat people tends to produce the same treatment back to us. If you don't trust them, they probably don't trust you either.

When you have this kind of mindset, you basically get what you deserve: a pure transactional relationship. You give them a small order and they give you equal service levels. You beat them up over pricing and wonder why it's hard to get a case of something on a Friday night. Actually, it's no surprise really.

When you abuse an animal long enough two things happen:

- They turn and bite you.
- They run away.

So, what happens after that? Usually, the restaurant changes vendors and the cycle just repeat itself. If you want to stop this immediately, then the best thing to do is change how you look at your vendor. Stop looking at the relationship as adversarial instead more of a partnership. Partners look out for each other. They know you have to make money to stay in business – well, so do they. Take it from someone who is seen the foodservice distribution side of the industry up close for many years. There is a lot of overhead involved in getting your case of French fries onto a truck to drop off at the back door of your restaurant.

Foodservice distributors make their money by streamlining their transportation cost. That means more cases on a truck, means lower cost for them. When you work as a partner with them and help them lower their cost, they in return can help lower your cost. Bottom line is everyone is a business to make a profit.

2. How We Treat Our Community

How we love to play the local card. Eat local. Buy local. If you look at restaurant marketing within your market, you can make a bet that at least 50 percent mention that they are local. The problem with the local card is that it tends to be one-sided. We want people to support our restaurant, yet do we go out of our way to support other local businesses? Isn't that what the community is all about? Supporting each other?

If you really want to promote your community, then you have to jump in and be a part of it. That does not mean just talking a good game — it means putting your money where your mouth is. It means talking up other local businesses that you like on your social media. It means getting involved with a local charity and volunteering your time or your hard-earned money.

True story: There once was a restaurant owner in a very small town. We're talking a really small town. The town was cool, hip, and it attracted investors who opened up the restaurant right across the street from this owner. The owner of the small restaurant was very angry that these investors opened a restaurant across the street. He was so angry that he would stand outside the front doors of the competition and as locals came out of the restaurant he would chastise them for not supporting local.

Now think about that for a second. Yes, the owners were investors from out-of-state. However, they purchased an abandoned building that was an eyesore of the community. They hired local construction crews to do the build out. They also hired 30 local people to work the restaurant. That all sounds like quite a win for the local economy.

The bottom line is that economies flourish when money is exchanged back and forth among the businesses in that community. Just like it was mentioned before, relationships have long-term benefits. Transactions are short-term and usually go to the lowest price.

3. How We Treat Our Team

Unless you own a food truck, it's safe to say that you're going to need a few people to help you run your restaurant. One of the most important jobs a restaurant owner or operator has is selecting who to employ for the restaurant. The second most important job is training them and giving them the tools they need to be successful. Probably the most overlooked job is treating the team in a manner that encourages retention.

It's so easy to place the blame on others. Most turnover is a self-fulfilling prophecy. What you expect from people exactly what they deliver. If you think your team is lazy and is stealing, here's a blind guess: That's exactly what you will find. Think your team is full of energy, dynamic, and great with your guests? Bingo, you win.

Now if your restaurant is having a hard time finding top talent that is full of energy, hard-working, dynamic, and personable, then you need to look within and see what signals your culture and you are sending out to those looking for employment. Taking a hard look in the mirror is never easy, however, it is often necessary.

So, how can restaurants treat their team better? Maybe offer pay that is slightly higher than average in your market? How about paid time off? How about flexible hours so they can go to school? How about family meals? How about just saying “thank you” more often? Once again, it comes down to relationships. Great relationships are built on mutual respect and trust. Trust. Builds. Teams.

4. How We Treat Our Guests

Almost as volatile as our love-hate relationship with vendors is the one people have with their guests. One day they love you and the next day they are slamming you on Yelp! What is a restaurant owner to do?

The first thing to do is take your adversarial attitude and bury it deep in the backyard. The second thing is to understand this: the guest is not always right, however the guest is always our guest and it's okay for the guest to be wrong. We just don't have to point it out. Sometimes it is better to take the high road.

There is a great acronym to help you resolve potential conflict with guests.

Use the word L.A.S.T.

Listen

Any time a guest lets you know that they have a problem or complaint, LISTEN. Listening provides the guest with the opportunity to feel validated, which is extremely important in reducing their disappointment. It also provides you with an opportunity to understand what has caused them to feel the way they do.

Apologize

Sincerely APOLOGIZE for the error. It makes no difference where the blame falls – your guest is disappointed. Apologizing allows the guest to feel understood

Solution

Focus on the SOLUTION. Always let a leader know right away what the situation is. The leader is there to support you and help you find the solution.

Thank

Always THANK your guests for bringing their concern to your attention. After all, how can you exceed expectations if you are unaware there is a problem? It is much easier for guests to say nothing when they have a poor experience and never return. When they tell you, it provides you with an opportunity to improve service for all guests in the future. For that, you should thank them.

Side note: Using the L.A.S.T. technique is also great when dealing with team issues. Who would not feel better if they felt they were being listened to, apologized to for any miscommunication, were helped when it comes to focusing on solutions, and thanked?

**SO, ARE YOU A GAZELLE OR A LION?
A GAZELLE WAKES UP AND JUST
GOES ABOUT HIS DAY DOING THE
SAME THING OVER AND OVER.
WHEN A LION STARTS CHASING,
ONLY THEN WILL THEY HAVE SOME
EXTERNAL MOTIVATION TO GET
MOVING OR GET EATEN. THE LION
ON THE OTHER HAND WAKES UP
WITH DRIVE AND DETERMINATION.
THE LION GOES AFTER WHAT IT
WANTS AND IS RELENTLESS IN ITS
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5. How We Treat Ourselves

Throughout this entire article, we've seen how improving relationships can improve our restaurant. How about the relationship with ourselves? If culture flows down, not up, and culture always starts with you, what are you doing to make sure you are at your best?

Most restaurant owners like to be the martyr. They love to use the excuse of time. Their battle cry is, "I just don't have enough time." The truth is you have the time – you just have not made it a priority. That is one thing that everyone has regardless of age, race, geographic location, or money in the bank account: We all have 24 hours a day. So before you start dropping excuse bombs, realize that successful people throughout history have used time to their advantage and not the other way around.

So, are you a gazelle or a lion? A gazelle wakes up and just goes about his day doing the same thing over and over. When a lion starts chasing, only then will they have some external motivation to get moving or get eaten. The lion on the other hand wakes up with drive and determination. The lion goes after what it wants and is relentless in its pursuit. Sadly, most people are like the gazelle and only get motivated when there's pressure. Put some pressure on yourself and be more like the lion. How do you do that?

Exercise: You would be amazed at the increased energy levels from adapting a consistent exercise program.

Eat better: We work in the restaurant industry, yet it's amazing how poorly people eat even when they're surrounded by amazing food.

Get some sleep: A common misconception is that it's quantity over quality. It's actually more important to get high-quality sleep. A lot of ultra-successful people function on five or six hours.

Drop the distractions: Social media can be a great tool for marketing and connecting. It can also be a black hole of wasted time. If you don't control your distractions, they will control you.

Restaurants get better when the people in them become better. If you want your restaurant to become better, you first need to take better care of yourself.

It's kind of ironic that the restaurant industry – which is centered around the concept of hospitality – can be very isolating. We have the power to change that. We can build better relationships with our vendors, our communities, our teams, our guests, and most importantly, ourselves. Respect for others starts with respect for yourself. Only then will the restaurant industry come together as one.