



The Ten Commandments Of Service Excellence

We all have our thresholds. Rankle our sensibilities, render lousy service and any one of us is capable of going ballistic. There are unwritten conventions governing professional bar conduct. You know most of them intuitively. Then why is it that so many bartenders consistently step on these seemingly straightforward rules? And why do so many of those bar jockeys wait on me?

A bartender's degree of professionalism is most apparent when the bar is slammed. Whether it's that certain "calm under fire" quality or their precise bursts of movement, really great bartenders are a genuine pleasure to watch. On the flip side, a bartender who loses his cool, making guests bear the brunt of his anger, is like a cold hard slap of reality. People get kicked around plenty in

their day-to-day lives without being subjected to it during "happy hour."

Murphy's Law—people get the worst service on those days when they can least emotionally afford it.

One such breach is failing to acknowledge that customers exist. When people sit down at a bar, they will typically extend the bartender a grace period before he sidles over to take their order. Miss the grace period and he'll nearly have to kill them with hospitality to overcome the snub. If a bartender is temporarily too busy to wait on guests, that grace period can be easily extended with a smile and an "I'll be right with you."

Another convention suggests that asking if a customer would like another drink when the

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person's glass is still half-full (or empty) is pushy and waiting until he is spinning the glass upside down on a length of sip sticks is inattentive. The most considerate time to ask is when the guest's drink is about a quarter full.

Likewise, few things are more disturbing to gin & tonic drinkers than bartenders who drop lime wedges into a drink without first squeezing the juice out of them. Fishing a lime wedge out of a drink is low on most people's list of fun things to do in public. The same holds true for Martini enthusiasts and lemon twists, so named because they are meant to be twisted, an action that expresses the lemon's essential oils and fragrance into the cocktail.

Tacky too is a bartender who is conspicuous when counting his tips. Gratuities are a private matter between two people—the customer and bartender—played out in a public setting. Counting tips at the bar is indiscreet.

Well, maybe I was wrong. Perhaps the tenets of great service aren't intuitive; maybe they have to be learned like everything else. So what commandments would make the list? Here's my take on it.

- **Scattered Priorities** — Working a high-volume bar requires “taking care of first things first;” waiting on bar customers before washing glasses, or preparing drink orders for food servers before finishing a conversation with a regular. Prioritizing tasks according to their highest and best use of time is essential to rendering great service.

- **Preferential Treatment** — While it's natural to prefer serving some people to others, it's a fundamental mistake to act upon those sentiments. Treating select customers like second-class citizens is not part of the job description. Your attitude and demeanor can betray how you feel as clearly as inattentive service.

- **Fixating On Gratuities** — Making a decent living behind a bar is best achieved through rendering prompt, competent service.

Concentrating on tips during a shift diverts your concentration from the job at-hand. Take care of your guests and the tips will take care of themselves.

- **Improved Short-Term Memory** — People appreciate being referred to by their name. Whether it's early on, or just before he or she departs, make a point of getting a guest's name, work to remember it, and then use it. While people appreciate bartenders remembering their names, they fully expect bartenders to remember what they're drinking.

- **Warm Smile And Friendly Attitude** — Gracious hospitality is the cornerstone of our business. Welcome people into the business as you would welcome guests into your home. There's little difference. Hardware stores wait on customers. In this business we serve guests.

- **Accommodate The Needs Of All Guests** — Conventional wisdom suggests that you should never say 'no' to a customer. Within reason, all requests should be fulfilled, regardless of the degree of hassle. People appreciate being catered to; it's at the core of being hospitable.

- **Take The Lead** — Guests will nearly always heed menu recommendations and suggestions on what to drink. But get rid of the canned delivery. Offer suggestions like you were feeding guests insider information; they'll love the personal attention. And don't be reticent to ask your guests' preferences. The more you know about your guests' preferences, the better service you can render.

- **Anticipating Guests Needs** — Service excellence can be defined as anticipating a guest's need well before they realize the need themselves. Refill water glasses and replenish breadbaskets without being asked. Likewise, many cocktails should be served with a back of water. So after you serve a martini or scotch, neat, return moments later with a glass of water. It's a classy thing to do.

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• **Cooperating Fully With Fellow Employees** — Providing timely assistance to a fellow employee improves the positive working environment and leads to a higher standard of service. That entails a cooperative effort, people helping each other to accomplish the stated objective, even when there may be no direct financial compensation pending. Teamwork will inevitably bail you out in a time of need. As you

know, the better the service, the better the tip. Prima donnas should pick another trade.

• **Be Entertaining** — Humor is the great equalizer and something that nearly everyone appreciates. If you can make someone smile, it may prove to be the best thing that happens to that person that whole day.

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