

Don't throw away manners when you throw a party

Some customers think of "the help" as those that should be cared for like a loyal hunting dog. And though I would prefer a higher status in life, I would consider the aforementioned treatment a luxury.

Appropriate behavior toward service-level staff is more than a ritual in civility; it is good business. It is necessary to know where the limits are when directing and working with staff. I would say the basics of human dignity and politeness are first.

Occasionally I've wanted to step over to a customer who was treating a waitress like someone out of a Tom Jones movie and say, "Excuse me, do you know she is one of your client's daughters?"

Social behavior at parties speaks to more than peer-level guests. It is wrong to assume that just because a person is in the service industry they are an Eliza Doolittle.

It is quite inappropriate to make any kind of sexual innuendos or even worse to physically harass any waiter or waitress — ever! The ramifications of such boorish social behavior toward these young people could equal a Pandora's box of business horrors.

A word of caution about discussing important business events at a social setting. You may be aware of who is near you as far as a guest but the waiters and waitresses have ears, too.

Thomas Jefferson had revolving dumb-waiters installed at Monticello so he was always completely alone during significant discussions. And the Sultans in Istanbul had waterfalls installed to thwart unwanted eavesdropping. The best advice I can give is: keep private what should be private.

I would say my staff's biggest complaint is the lack of "please" and "thank you." An important CEO who seeks attention and more alcohol by pounding his glass on the bar and jerking his head rarely triggers the "I want to serve you" action response. However, a smile and a polite, "Excuse me, miss, may I please have another scotch and water?" will elicit instant and expert service.

It doesn't take much to show the respect a server deserves. Being inconsiderate to staff only reflects on the host or the guest.

After grasping "the waiters and waitresses are people too" concept, a second point of proper etiquette is being a good leader.

It's my pleasure to work for a couple of grand hostesses who understand their role perfectly. The tables are always set properly. A timetable of events is on the kitchen counter. A guest list has been forwarded to my office the week before. All the plates are marked for each course, the menu is placed in a prominent place so all staff can clearly see what they are to do, fresh towels are available for washing and bars have been set up.

The stage is set, so to speak. But these people are few and far between. They are



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of the old school. They know where the forks all go and how long to let a cocktail hour extend. Mostly, though, they know what to tell the people who are working for them.

An uneducated consumer can appear inconsiderate to the staff if they have not matched the proper proportion of staff to the event. That host or hostess can actually get nasty thinking the job was being done improperly.

For instance, if there are 10 guests and it is a step up from "family," two staffers should be able to handle the dinner adequately. But to hire one person to run the kitchen and bar as well as the service for a formal affair is too much to expect. Failure is inevitable.

A cocktail party with 50 guests, indoors and fairly formal, should have one bartender, two waitresses to pass drinks and hors d'oeuvres, a person to pick up dirty glasses and plates, and two people in the kitchen to prepare food and clean dishes. Sometimes a small bar can be set up in the kitchen to have drinks made up and passed to lighten the bartender's load if the guests arrive all at once.

Often at this time of year, casual events are more common. Fifty guests could be handled by two staff (and even less if the host was agreeable to helping with the bar) if plastic glasses and paper cocktail plates are used.

So after you know what atmosphere you want, you can decide — or help your caterer decide — how many staff need to be employed for an event.

Allow plenty of time for setting up. Guests have a bad habit of coming early. I had a hostess accidentally invite her guests for two different times, so some came at 5:30 and some at 6:30. My crew was set to arrive an hour early: 5:30. It was interesting. That may not happen to you, but there is always a wedding guest who skips the ceremony and goes directly to the reception.

All events will go more smoothly if you allow the staff to arrive early enough to be properly prepared. A great host always understands the need to anticipate an emergency. So if you are not a frequent party-giver, don't save pennies by having your party servers arrive at the last minute.

Tippling service personnel relates directly to the degree of work being performed. Some staff are paid less than minimum wage and their tips are supposed to bring their earned income up to legal wage guidelines. Some establishments may tag on a "service charge" to a bill but that is not the gratuity.

Many times the staff is put in an awkward position by their employer and may end up with very poor wages. You can ask the staff if their tip is part of the bill. They will be happy to tell you.

Average tipping in this area has increased to 17 percent and, many times, to 20 percent. At a private wedding or other catered event, it is not acceptable to tip the bartenders, as the host will include their gratuity with the rest of the staff in the total bill.

If, however, the event has a cash bar then tipping is appropriate. All coat checks get \$1, as do car hops (but in rain the rate goes up). Powder room staff at clubs should be given anywhere from 50 cents to \$1.

Know the difference between what is the waiter's fault and what is out of his or her control. For instance, if you have the table right next to people who are getting fantastic service and you have the same waiter and are being ignored, that is the waiter's fault. You should tip below the average.

You may not know everything there is about running a perfect party, but if you can just maintain and allow a level of dignity and keep your common decency, all will probably be forgiven and go better than you ever anticipated. □

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