

CHRISTMAS: DON'T FORGET THE CUSTOMER

New survey reveals customer perceptions about festive dining

Slow service, overcrowding and inferior food quality are diners' biggest annoyances during the festive period according to more than 300 consumers in a survey conducted by The Mystery Dining Company on dining out at Christmas.

The survey also revealed that when it came to choosing where to eat, there is a clear divide in preferences; **35%** sought out a venue based on its **atmosphere while 31% made a decision based on the menu on offer**. Yet, when it came to the event itself, **three out of four respondents said the quality of the food**, rather than speed of service or staff friendliness, **was the most important element**.

Opinions were split when it came to preferred menus. **43% favoured traditional Christmas dishes while 37% wanted to see a menu with lighter or more modern options**, reinforcing the need for caterers to offer something to suit all tastes.

When it came to perceived problem areas **56% of participants said it was the kitchen's failure** to cope with the volume of orders which generally resulted in a decline in performance, while **33%** suggested that it was **issues arising from either having an inadequate number or poorly trained staff**.

"Keeping hospitality at the forefront is critical, even if it is your busiest time of the year and the survey results reflect this," warns TMDC's Sally Whelan.

"Profitability should always be measured against the ability to give the customer an experience they will remember. Squeezing in extra tables so that you can fit in an additional 10 covers per sitting is dangerous if you don't have adequate space or capability: it's not just the extra guests whose experience will be affected; there will be a knock-on effect for other customers, as well as your staff in the kitchen and on the floor who will need to cope with the additional pressure."

Instead, she suggests, venues should look at where you can improve on spend per head while still delivering an experience worthy of the establishment's reputation.

"The importance to staff training really comes into play in peak periods. It's not just about turning tables, getting the style of service right can bring benefits. If staff are encouraged to offer genuine recommendations at appropriate times they can generally improve the value of an order, especially at Christmas when people are a bit more inclined to indulge. For example, **more than half** of the survey respondents said they were **prepared to spend more on beverages**, both alcoholic and non alcoholic variety, at this time of the year than any other. Likewise, **3 out of 5 consumers said that they would be more likely to order an aperitif or digestif as part of their meal out if it was offered**.

Whelan suggests looking beyond alcoholic beverage sales to boost profits by highlighting options such as freshly squeezed juices and sparkling drinks which can be consumed alongside alcoholic beverages as well as non-alcoholic cocktails for designated drivers and extending hot beverage menus to include coffee or hot chocolate-themed cocktails.

When putting together a set menu the TMDC director stresses the need to consider customers' expectations:

"If you are renowned for a particular dish or style of cooking then you should make sure a limited menu reflects this otherwise you're likely to disappoint loyal customers and fail to make the right impression on new ones. Also with the majority of consumers eating out on

"It's the time of year when too many restaurants lose their sense of hospitality in favour of blatant money making"
Mystery Diner

multiple occasions it is important for venues to deliver some variation in their menus – it will also help ensure the experience stands out against their other meals out”.

“An important recurring theme in the feedback we received is the disappointment felt by a consumer when they don’t feel as though they are receiving value for money,” explains Whelan. **“One in five participants said value for money was the main reason for choosing a venue in previous years however given current spending cuts and general economic instability we expect there will be even greater pressure on operators to deliver value as well experience this year.”**

“Ultimately, customers understand that Christmas is the busy season for the hospitality industry and as such most are willing to accept a minor decline in service levels; however this can work two ways - if a restaurant impresses when they are at their busiest there’s a good chance that customers will choose to return later in the year but if they leave disappointed or frustrated you’re unlikely to see them again soon.”

Other Results:

- 6 out of 10 said that they eat out between 3 and 5 times during the Christmas period
- Nearly all (96%) dine out as a group of 5 or more during December
- 31% said limited menu choices were the most annoying element of eating out. Noise generated from other patrons, over-crowding and not getting value for money also featured highly.

- ENDS -

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