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CHRISTMAS CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STARTS NOW TMDC warns businesses to be ready to court bookings

Spend per head is set to be one of the major influencing factors when it comes to choosing where to eat out this Christmas according to a recent survey from The Mystery Dining Company.

Despite rising food costs and an increase in VAT the majority of restaurant goers said that they were unlikely to increase their average budget for a Christmas meal out with friends, family and colleagues this year. 80% said they intended to spend the same as they did last year, which was generally between £16 and £35* per head.

The survey of more than 300 people, of whom 60% said they were likely to make at least one booking for a group of 8 or more during the festive season, also revealed that rather than cutting down on the number occasions they went out, half of them intended to scrutinise menus more closely before choosing where to eat out in order to keep a grip on spending.

“Reassuring the customer that they will get value for money will be a crucial factor for restaurateurs this year. Three quarters of respondents said they would consider three to five different restaurants’ menus before making a reservation. This enables them to work out how expensive a meal out will be, taking into account food, drinks and any service charge for larger bookings as well as the menu quality itself. They will ultimately be comparing and contrasting in the hope of ensuring they have the best all-round experience,” explains Sally Whelan, director at The Mystery Dining Company.

Although word of mouth recommendations and local knowledge is what 50% of consumers say will help them to create a shortlist of venues, Whelan warns that having the right information on a website and ensuring that menus are easy to find and well presented is vital.

“70% of people we surveyed said that they would look to access a menu from the venue’s own website when they were considering where to go for a Christmas meal. Only 1 in 5 people said they would ask the venue to supply them with one meaning that any venue not giving potential customers easy access to this information are potentially doing themselves out of business,” she adds.

Providing an all round positive experience – from the point the customer considers looking at a menu, through to making the booking, the warmth of welcome they receive upon arrival through to the meal itself and how efficiently the end of the evening, such as paying the bill and arranging transportation if necessary, is handled - make a big difference to how a group of people will remember the event, regardless of how good the company they are sharing is according to Whelan.

“It can be easy to forget just how important the actual reservation process is when it comes to group bookings. Many people will use it as an opportunity to test the staff member on the other end of the phone to ensure they are knowledgeable, efficient and most importantly welcoming,” she said.

Whelan’s advice to restaurant operators is to look at the training given to staff and the processes in place for taking reservations over this busy period.

“Winning over customers during this exchange is important and you want to leave them feeling confident in the choice they have made. If they aren’t reassured by the response they receive during this call there is a good chance that they will be left feeling apprehensive about their choice and in some cases this will be enough to make them cancel the booking and look elsewhere.”

Restaurant owners hoping to significantly boost annual turnover from Christmas trade may also need to think again, as while the majority of consumers were happy paying closer attention to menus to keep spending under control this festive season, 16% intended to cut down the number of occasions that they went out, while a further 11% said they were considering swapping meals out with friends for drinks instead in order to save money. On the positive side, 21% said they were likely to do as they pleased without regard for their finances and 6% said they would probably go out more than previous years.

The survey also revealed that around a third of the participants planned on making their bookings in December, meaning restaurants who are low on bookings in the preceding months still have the opportunity to market themselves during the final weeks before Christmas.

For further information about The Mystery Dining Company’s range of programmes and services, including mystery calls and mystery visits, visit www.mysterydining.com or call 01225 470 999.

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Notes:

* 28% of respondents said they spent between £16 - £25 per head, per meal while 37% spent between £26 and £35.

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