



Restaurant & Hotel

Defuse the Difficult Diner

by [Peter Vogt](#)

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He doesn't like where he's sitting. He orders something not even remotely on the menu. His food is too cold, too spicy or both. He wants what he wants, he wants it now, and he'll be vocal to get it if necessary -- even if it means causing a scene.

He's the quintessential difficult diner, and whether you're a member of the waitstaff, a manager or even the owner, you'll be seeing him in your restaurant soon enough, if you haven't already. How you react -- or don't -- will determine whether you and your establishment's other patrons have a miserable experience.

"Customers become diners from hell when the restaurant staff handles the situation poorly," says Lynda Ford, president of HR consulting firm The Ford Group in Rome, New York, and a 15-year veteran of the restaurant industry who is now a human resources expert and trainer. "It takes some skill and finesse, but most customers can be won over. It's the attitude and actions of the staff that tend to inflame a situation to the point of no return."

These tips will help you defuse your difficult diners:

Maintain Your Professionalism, No Matter What

"You have virtually no control over what a patron might do or say, but you have the ultimate control over what you will do or say," says Phillip Van Hooser, an expert on customer service and author of [Willie's Way: 6 Secrets for Wooing, Wowing, and Winning Customers and Their Loyalty](#).

Granted, it may not be easy to maintain that control when you're faced with a rude and obnoxious patron. But the alternative -- challenging the diner to a battle of insults, for example, or repeatedly trying to shift the blame to your coworkers or the restaurant itself -- will only make things worse.

"Regardless of how the situation unfolds, your primary objective is to handle what comes in a professional manner," says Van Hooser. "Remember: Other [patrons] are probably watching."

Practice Active Listening

It's one thing to hear a complaining customer; it's another to really listen to him -- to use words and body language that tell him you understand what he's saying, even if you don't necessarily agree.

Active listening alone can often calm a customer. So pay close attention to what the customer is telling you, paraphrasing the gist of his complaint, repeating it back to him and maintaining solid eye contact throughout the interaction.

"It's important that you understand why the customer is upset," says Ford. Van Hooser adds that it's just as critical to give the customer "time to vent. Give the person a chance to get their feelings out."

Think Solution or Transfer

Once you've figured out the customer's main problem, "negotiate a solution or a transfer," says Van Hooser.

Negotiating a solution, he says, might look like this:

"Ma'am, I'm sorry for your displeasure with your meal. Is there something I can do to correct the situation?"

"Listen carefully to the customer's response to see if it is realistic or not," Van Hooser says. "If it is, fix the problem without any further fanfare."

If it isn't, consider negotiating a transfer, which might look like this:

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I don't have the authority to comp your meal. Would you like me to arrange for you to speak with the manager or chef?"

"This is not simply a case of passing the buck but rather of putting the patron in contact with the person best positioned to remedy their complaint," Van Hooser says.

Naturally, you can't make every diner happy. "The customer is not always right, nor are you or I," says Van Hooser. "But as someone before me has said, 'The customer may not always be right, but they are still the customer.'"

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