

The Secret Service

Let's face it, over the coming months it's going to be an uphill struggle to lure thrifty spenders away from their easy-on-the-pocket TV dinners, so with restaurants needing to consider fundamental value-for-money tricks to maintain trade, **Emma-Jane Batey** chats to a handful of restaurants whose simple and economical service techniques ensure a loyal customer following

At a time when we're all clinging tightly to our hard-earned cash, the thought of spending good money on bad service is unthinkable. Sales of supermarkets' own-brand value ranges are on the rise and with this is a new-found enthusiasm for budget-friendly home cooking. With this in mind, it's time for restaurants and pubs across the board to up their game and recognise that customers will demand faultless experiences all round, if they're to continue venturing out to eat at all.

We want value for money from our dining experiences. That doesn't have to mean enormous plates of food courtesy of all-you-can-eat buffets, but at the very least some effort on the service front – the little extras that make a customer feel good and hardly cost the restaurant a bean.

Philip Stanley MIH, general manager of Hospitality Assured at the Institute of Hospitality agrees:

"It's so important to greet customers with a warm, genuine smile. Even if you can't speak to them straight away, you must make eye contact so they know you have acknowledged them. Good service has always been about making customers feel special, which is true now more than ever as people are often only going out to eat for an important occasion."

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Nikki Yabsley, Webb's restaurant

Enthusiastic greetings are well known at TGI Friday's, a chain that is passionate about making its customers feel special. Trevor Reeves, manager of the flagship Covent Garden branch, knows how important recruiting the right people is for creating the lively atmosphere it's famous for. "What we say is that we're all about Friday's food, served by Friday's people in Friday's restaurants," Trevor explained.

"Most of our waiting, host and bar staff are actors working part time – big characters that can be hard to manage but great for getting the place buzzing with excitement! Our door host makes sure that customers are greeted quickly and taken to the bar or a table straightaway. We talk to customers as individuals and make sure we make a fuss of them. If they're here for a celebration we put balloons on their chair, so everyone congratulates them as they go past. And of course there's the free birthday cake and singing – as loud as possible!"

These service techniques may not be to everyone's taste, but the underlying principal is a great business driver. It pays to make friends with your customers. It's not just the major chains that are encouraging their staff to give a little extra. The family-run Webb's Restaurant in Liskeard, Cornwall has come up with its own low-cost, high impact idea.

Manager Nikki Yabsley told us: "Where possible we make a point of greeting our customers by name and all of our staff say hello and make eye contact – not just the waiter for their table. Our head chef, Tom, thought of baking individual two-tone loaves of fresh bread for every table, every day. This season's bread is sun blush tomato and basil in the white half and walnut and sultana in the granary half, which we serve sliced with a dish of Cornish butter. It's a real talking point and makes our set lunch menu even better value for money."

Looking internationally for similar examples of service fundamentals, in France, a basket of fresh baguette is a given on any restaurant table. In Narbonne, a popular tourist town along the Canal du Midi in the Mediterranean, local bistro En Face is managed by James Wickenden, a Frenchman with English parents.

Like many other restaurant staff across France, James trained at the local school of catering, perfecting impressive table skills such as filleting cooked fish and crêpe flambé. He takes the business of customer service very seriously.

"Most of our customers come to En Face for a relaxing, home-cooked meal, so we want them to feel comfortable and welcome.

"We greet them quickly, take them to a table, offer an aperitif – there is a

wonderful local sparkling white wine which is delicious – and we deliver chilled water, fresh bread and a dish of local Lucques olives."

All the restaurants quizzed agreed that looking after their waiting staff was imperative in maintaining a positive atmosphere – paying fairly and on time, with good training and career potential were noted as essential.

Nowhere is this more apparent than at Jamie Oliver's Fifteen, a charitable foundation that offers disadvantaged youngsters a future in food. Fifteen's communications manager, Wendy Richmond, said: "There is a family atmosphere to our culture and all of us are motivated by our social purpose – the apprenticeship scheme that helps turn forgotten young people into world class chefs. Our customer service ethos at Fifteen is that we always try to pass on our knowledge and love of food to our guests.

"The training we give our staff really reflects that and it is important that they know what kind of experience we want to offer our guests."

There's little gain in passing blame for dwindling bums on seats solely on the fragile economy. As consumers, we still want to enjoy the atmosphere of a meal eaten away from home, be it slightly less frequently when finances are stretched. By concentrating on feel-good service techniques restaurants help the customer acknowledge their unique points of difference. They have an immediate impact on a customer's perception of their value to the restaurant. Whether the food's first-rate or not, poor service will always leave the guest with a sour taste in their mouth. ■

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Trevor Reeves, TGI Friday's

