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The Essentials of Successful Service
*A Seminar for Restaurateurs held during the American Express
Trade Program at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic*

ASPEN, CO June 18, 1994 -- Many a restaurateur has considered the question: "Which is more important -- service or food?" Attendees of the American Express Trade Program at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic found an answer during the seminar, "The Essentials of Successful Service," where speaker Karen MacNeil, Founder and Co-Director of The New York Professional Service School, offered compelling reasons why good service is of critical importance to a restaurant's success.

"American Express has long emphasized the importance of world class service, both to our merchants and to Cardmembers," said Lloyd Wirshba, vice president and general manager of restaurant and entertainment industries at American Express. "We also know that providing good service is an issue of particular interest to our restaurant partners. Through seminars such as 'Essentials of Successful Service,' we hope not only to help restaurateurs improve the quality of their service, but ultimately increase their profitability."

MacNeil began by sharing the results of a survey of food professionals that she conducted three years earlier: 50 chefs, restaurant critics, and food experts questioned, 49 said that they believed service was more important than food.

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MacNeil had also polled restaurant patrons and found that while most had generalized memories, at best, of a restaurant's food, they very often remembered specific details of the restaurant service -- especially if they considered the service to have been poor. Therefore, MacNeil concluded, "It is essential for restaurateurs to properly train their waitstaff. In the most successful restaurants, waitstaff training does not exist in a vacuum, it is considered a marketing tool. After all, a restaurant's service is as much its product as is its food."

MacNeil illustrated her points through a series of scenarios, with a cast of seasoned industry professionals playing the roles of waiters and customers. Among those participating were Alex Brennan-Martin, manager of Brennan's of Houston; Susie Southgate-Fox, VP of Human Resources for Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc.; and Madeline Triffon, Wine Director of The Rattlesnake Club in Detroit.

The first scenario focused on the language, behavior and food knowledge of a restaurant's waitstaff. MacNeil instructed the audience to play the role of the restaurant manager, and to offer their opinions of the service provided by a harried waitress to a particularly inquisitive and inexperienced couple. As she fielded comments and questions from the audience, MacNeil offered advice on training waitstaff in the art of communication and menu knowledge.

She stressed that restaurant managers need to instruct their waitstaff in learning how to "read" a customer. For example, she offered, when customers ask a lot of questions, they might be saying "We don't know what we're doing. Help us. Take care of us ... Guide us through this." Waitstaff, she added, must be taught how to offer all suggestions and commentary in a positive light. It is unprofessional for a waiter to offer a personal opinion, said MacNeil. "Pay especially close attention to your waiters' language because it's how they present you to the world," MacNeil exhorted the restaurateurs in attendance.

Table service was the subject of the second scenario. The audience evaluated the behavior of a friendly but somewhat unprofessional new waitress, and shared their observations with MacNeil. The ensuing discussion centered on where waiters should serve from, how they should position themselves in relation to the "customer's circle" and how to "gain control" of the table.

MacNeil debunked the myth of "serve from the left and remove from the right." "The real rule," she confided, "is to serve from the point of least resistance." Meaning that the waiter should position him or herself so that he/she can pour or serve easily without having to worry about bumping the customers. Furthermore, MacNeil added, all service should be made "off the hip," otherwise, if a waiter serves from shoulder- or chest-level, the food can be literally in the customer's face.

MacNeil discussed what she called the "customer's circle" -- the area of personal space surrounding a customer. "Waitstaff should be taught to move into and out of this circle," said MacNeil. "If a waiter wants someone to do something ... he or she should move into the customer's circle for a minute and then move out of it. All great captains know this technique...it's a statement of dominance. It's also a matter of gentility."

Additionally, if a waiter wishes to get a group of customers to order or to remove their napkins, MacNeil recommended the waiter find the "weak link." "The weak link is the person who is paying the least attention to the conversation at hand, and who is most uncomfortable in a restaurant." A waiter should always approach the weak link first, said MacNeil, because he or she is the most likely to pick up on the waiter's unspoken cues. That person will usually oblige when the waiter gives a subtle look or nod which says, "You seem to be ready; set an example for the others."

The third and final scenario addressed the subject of difficult customers. In this scene, two sisters began bickering the moment they sat down, giving their unfortunate waiter the brunt of their foul mood. In circumstances like these, MacNeil noted, "The more difficult the table, the more the waiter should move into the customer's circle." By doing so, MacNeil said, the customers will become conscious of the waiter's presence, and eventually decide to continue their argument in private.

Another component of this scenario was a situation where a customer finds something unwanted, such as a piece of glass in the food. In such a case, MacNeil stressed that the waiter should not offer to replace the dish with a second dish of the same, but instead should steer the customer away from that dish entirely, and offer to replace it with a different item from the menu. Otherwise, the customer is likely to pick uneasily at the food the entire time, expecting to find another unpleasant surprise hidden there.

In closing, MacNeil pointed out that she utilizes such role-playing scenarios when training waitstaff, and encouraged her audience to do the same: "One of the best restaurant training methods is to invent scenarios that come right out of a real restaurant experience and to role-play with the restaurant staff. It's not hard to do, and it's a fun and very effective training methodology."

"The Essentials of Successful Service" was the fifth of nine seminars and roundtable discussions held at the American Express Trade Program at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic. The American Express Trade Program was created five years ago to support the restaurant industry, and it focuses on issues restaurateurs have identified as being of critical importance within the industry today.

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