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On The Table #7

Espresso Bar Staff Training: Part I of a Three Part Series - Customer Service

Dear cyber reader, In my travels documenting espresso coffee, I have encountered several individuals in the business that were very enthusiastic about fine espresso coffee. But I have seen very few bar owners that were able to infect their staff with their own zeal. The old truth about running a business holds especially true for an espresso bar: nothing is as difficult as hiring, training, and motivating a staff.



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Hiring

How do we hire good people for manning the espresso machine? And, what do we teach them when we take them on? In my next three columns I will examine customer service, training, and creating a culture of excellence as they pertain to the business of owning a specialty coffee shop serving espresso.

Customer Service the big C

The first point to consider is that the coffee business is a customer service business. You can make the best coffee in the world, and if your service is slow or snooty, you are goin' down. In my opinion, customer service people are born, not made. You need an alert, observant person who possesses an easy confidence with people and a tolerably clean appearance. In short, you need a people person. The best you can do is to refine these innate essential qualities, but some people are simply not customer service types.

The key aspect that defines the service style of a barista, as opposed to a waiter in a restaurant, or a clerk at the perfume counter at Nordy's, is that in most cases you will see your customers several times a week, if not daily. And on some shifts you may greet up to 500 people. That means you can not get real personal with customers. Digging in and engaging people in conversation will quickly wear you and your customers out. We call it being "sticky", sticking to each customer with extraneous conversation, wit, or Oscar picks will quickly burn you out in this job.

Rather, at an espresso bar you should try to observe people and meet their needs as warmly and efficiently as you can. It is the art of observation. Watch people for clues.

This morning Alice just dashed in, snatched a glance at her watch and started hopping around like a Mexican Jumping Bean. Obviously, she is in a hurry. I see her every day and know she wants a double short Americano to go. Today she's in a panic, and she is third in line behind two short lattes to go, one with vanilla. I make her coffee, while steaming for the two lattes. Filling the double paper cups with hot water, and adding the espresso shots takes about 8 seconds. Then I hand it to her over the top of the machine, and tell her to pay for it next time. I have made Alice's day, and I hardly said a word.

That's service. Observe and meet people's needs with style and pathos, a feeling for their situation. If you have wits like razors, it is good...just use them sparingly for best effect in the coffee world. Humor takes energy, everything takes energy. Put the energy into the coffee and be chromium with people. Offer a sunny reflection, and glide through each encounter.

In observing them closely you will communicate to your customer a powerful message...when you enter my store you are the center of attention. It isn't that I have crowded them with useless chatter, it is rather that I have made eye contact quickly, greeted them and said "be right with ya." Simple and clean, and the customer knows they are valued AND feels comfortable coming in daily. Then of course you must follow with perfectly made coffee, so next month we will take a close look at the human qualities that make a fine coffee maker.

I may make a customer's coffee for a couple of years before asking their name. And then only if a natural opportunity to converse pops up. I never crowd people with my personality, I give them space to be grumpy and funky before the first cup of the day. The key is that by my mannerisms and behavior they feel cared for and valued.

The Personality Trap

It has been noted by many a successful coffee shop owner that employees with very gregarious, and engaging personalities can increase your business because they make people feel good. It is the song of the siren. Your little shop will crash on the reef if one individual's personality becomes your customer's reason for being there.

Take William for example. I pursued and hired an extremely talented, handsome young man, just out of Drama School with more witty routines than Carter has pills. Problem was he was forever running his little gags like my bar was a stage. He paid no attention to people that

were in a hurry, or wanted their coffee a little bit extra hot, or light syrup in an almond mocha. No, William's world was far more interesting to him than creating fine coffee. And, pretty soon people came to me with stories of finding a dime in the bottom of their cappuccino or milk not being steamed for a caffè latte.

And, even if your witty employees have better pathos than William, pretty soon they will be gone. Taking their personalities with them. We call a personality based style of service giving the customer a life. Well my customers already have a life, they come to me for my coffee.

OK soapbox time. As I have said in so many ways in past columns the promise of this whole business, specialty coffee, is a better tasting cup of coffee. If you base your business on a creating a better cup of coffee than people have ever experienced they will never leave you. You the owner must have a passion for good coffee. Passion is not waving your arms and talking in an exaggerated Italian accent. It is rather, the amount of work and money you expend towards improvement of the coffee. Espresso coffee is especially responsive to passion. Without great passion you should not enter this business.

So next month we will look at hiring and training as it relates to excellence in the cup.

Ciao for now!

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