

It is Not about Compensation

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Abstract

A vegan family purchases some vegetarian dishes at a restaurant to take home. When the family starts eating the food, a family member discovers clams in the soup. She calls the restaurant and is treated rudely. When she goes back to the restaurant, she receives no apology from the staff at the restaurant. The way she is treated, indicates that her family is suspected of trying to cheat, having added some clams to the food themselves, in order to get a discount. After much discussion, she is offered a discount by the manager, which she refuses point-blank.

Key words: apologize; compensation; discounts; restaurant; vegetarian

The Story

Due to various factors, I have been a vegetarian for over twenty years. One month ago, I went to a restaurant to pick up some vegetarian dishes for my birthday party. My family was very satisfied with the cuisine. However, my daughter suddenly yelled at me to stop eating and said that there were clams in the soup. I was pretty startled that vegetarian cuisine came mixed with seafood.

I called the restaurant and told them what had happened. The person on the phone denied and argued saying that such a thing had never happened before. She then asked me to hold while she spoke with her assistant manager to certify that they had dealt with my case. Once she returned, I was told that I had to take a picture of the soup with clams and bring it back to the restaurant before the restaurant closed - otherwise I would not get any compensation. I declined to drive back to the restaurant right away. The waitress gave me the impression that I was trying to cheat them to get a discount or a free meal.

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The next day I went back to the restaurant and returned the food that had not been eaten. I was told that I would get no compensation because the offer made was valid only for the previous night. I told the waitress that my entire family was vegetarian and some had allergies to seafood. It would be ridiculous for me to put seafood in the soup. Moreover, I told her that I was not interested in any compensation. I was interested in a safe meal for my family. The manager came over to see what the issue was. I explained to him everything that happened with the vegetarian cuisine I bought, how their staff dealt with my case, and what I wanted. I wanted safe food rather than compensation or a refund. After about twenty minutes of talking with him, I received no apology from the manager, but again a discount was offered to me. I rejected the discount proposal and said to them “What I want is safe food, not compensation.”

Solutions

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions:

- A. Upon receiving the complaint, the waitress should ask the customer to provide proof by sending a photo of the soup in question via smartphone.
- B. The restaurant should offer the customer a discount on the current meal.
- C. The restaurant should offer the customer a new vegetarian dish.
- D. The restaurant should send a representative with adequate status to explain why this mistake might have happened and offered assurance that this problem will not happen again.
- E. The restaurant should offer the customer a discount on a future meal.

Assessments

Surface Assessment

This story is about an unsatisfactory experience with a restaurant takeout service. Because the customer was no longer on site, it is going to be difficult for the restaurant to use some of the conventional apologetic tools, such as offering a complimentary dish or discount for the current meal. Therefore, solution F is a more feasible solution for the restaurant. However, it is a good idea for the restaurant to use solution A to verify the situation, and D and E to ease the customer’s dissatisfaction.

Deep Assessment

There are many reasons that contribute to an individual’s decision to become a vegan, such as religion, fitness regimen, improved health, kindness to animals, culinary preference, and the environment. Some of these reasons are personal choices that, when violated, could be construed as an affront to the customer. The

restaurant dismisses the severity of their mistake and treats it as a trivial matter, which further aggravates the customer. To make the situation worse, the restaurant's refusal to rectify the problem forced the customer to confront them in person the following day. Even then, the restaurant still attempts to shift the blame. There are many points in this story where the restaurant can "turn the tide", but they fail to act appropriately which exasperates the situation.

The customer repeatedly states that what they want is a safe meal to enjoy with family members. It is clear that, at that point, the customer was extremely frustrated with the restaurant and only demands the restaurant's acknowledgment to the problem. By then, the restaurant had missed all of their chances to redeem themselves. The allegorical lesson behind this story is that one should not be afraid to apologize for a mistake. Customers can tolerate a certain degree of mistakes as long as no real harm is done. Not to acknowledge that mistake often makes things worse.

Solution Points Awarded for Multiple Choice Selection

Select (circle) one of the following alternative solutions.

- A. Upon receiving the complaint, the waitress should ask the customer to provide proof by sending a photo of the soup in question via smartphone. 1 point; while this solution does not address the problem with a customer complaint, it does help to screen out people trying to take advantage of the restaurant. By itself, this is not a legitimate solution, but it is probably necessary for restaurateurs to maintain a certain level of cost control. This solution should, however, be implemented with caution. The restaurant should not exert any more burdens on the customer. They should also apologize for the inconvenience and thank the customer for their cooperation.
- B. The restaurant should offer the customer a discount on the current meal. 1 point; this solution may not be feasible depending on customer's payment method. If the customer uses a credit card to pay for the meal, it is possible for the restaurant to refund some of the money through the credit card company. However, if the customer pays in cash, it will be difficult or costly for the restaurant to give them a refund.
- C. The restaurant should offer the customer a new vegetarian dish. 1 point; this solution faces a similar problem that solution B had. The restaurant would have to dispatch an employee if they wanted to adopt this solution, which is time-consuming and not cost-effective.
- D. The restaurant should send a representative with adequate status to explain why this mistake might have happened and offered assurance that this problem will not happen again. 3 points; this solution allows customers to understand the situation and helps them to accept the apology. Assurance to not repeat the mistake is also an essential component to re-build the customer's confidence in the restaurant. The restaurant should; however, tread lightly and not to be

too defensive. Otherwise, an explanation is likely to become an excuse, which is not going to be perceived positively by the customer.

- E. The restaurant should offer the customer a discount on a future meal. 4 points; this is a more workable solution for the restaurant to offer. It also provides an incentive for the customer to return in the future.

Editorial Commentary

The quality of a full-service restaurant can be assessed in three ways: (1) food quality, (2) service quality, and (3) pleasant setting (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Restaurants can charm their customers by using enticing aromas, nice ambiance, good music, and pleasant service. Takeout, on the other hand, is different because it mostly relies on food quality. Takeout service does not share the “inseparability” nature of traditional service encounter. Individuals that utilize takeout service have minimum contact with the food service provider and spend very little or no time at all in the restaurant. In a takeout situation, “food” conveys the quality of the restaurant and thoughtfulness of the chef to the customer. The distinction between typical restaurant and takeout service and how that distinction affects takeout service recovery is what makes this case so interesting.

The story and the solutions focus mainly on human interaction. However, if a takeout service is to excel, they should pay more attention to the food component and never let the mistake leave the kitchen. Therefore, unlike in the story, I will start by discussing the role of food in takeout service. In the documentary film, *Jiro dreams of sushi* (Gelb, 2011), the 3-starred Michelin chef adjusts the size of the sushi depending on the gender of customers. This way, male and female customers can finish their food at the same time with an equal satiate level. He will also position the sushi according to the customers’ dominant hand. From these small and seemingly trivial efforts, we can understand why Jiro earns his title as Michelin chef. This is a case where the food component plays a dominant role in the restaurant environment. His restaurant, a sushi bar, has only 10 seats and does not include its own lavatory. Obviously, Jiro’s restaurant is different from takeout, but his example allows us to see how a chef communicates through food.

In the story, the takeout service failed to show their compassion to vegetarian customers. The author did not explicitly state her reason for being a vegetarian, but she did mention a family member who is allergic to seafood. Even when the takeout service is unaware of this fact, they still need to take extra care when a customer specifically orders a full vegan meal. Let us use the two most popular reasons to go vegan as examples. If the customers choose veganism for religious reasons, the mixed seafood offends the customer’s beliefs. Leading customers to accidentally eat food products which are forbidden for religious reasons may constitute consumer fraud and infringe religious faiths (Premanandh, 2013). If the customer refuses to eat certain food due to allergies, the provision of wrong food could result in hospitalization and put the takeout service in jeopardy in terms of a potential lawsuit and large settlement fee. Even if all of these negative outcomes can be avoided, the

wrong food still showed that the takeout service personnel had no empathy for the customers' needs. The customer is likely to refuse to patronize the takeout service in the future. In short, this mistake should not have happened.

Another interesting situation unique to takeout service recovery is that the customer is not there to receive the restaurant's offer of reconciliation. Full-service restaurants have many ways to deal with upset customers, and because it is easier for the customers to make complaints while they are at the restaurant, they are less prone to bottle up their feelings. Takeout customers, on the other hand, may just drift away without contacting the takeout service. In the story, the customer's phone call is good news considering that they were willing to offer the restaurant a chance to redeem itself. The solutions and related discussion in this story are quite astute. It highlights the practical difficulties that the restaurant faces when trying to compensate the customer. Perhaps, this is why the takeout service was reluctant to offer any compensation. Since the takeout service was unable to easily provide any immediate remedy to the problem, it stands to reason that they could offer the customer something in the future. It is also a good idea to offer an apology and an explanation so the customer does not engage in speculation.

There is one more thing to discuss. The "next day encounter" is actually the final line of defense for the takeout service. If the situation is handled properly, the customer should not feel the need to return to the restaurant and make the complaint in person. Even then, the manager in the story still seemed clueless to the problem. Furthermore, when the customer verbally expressed that they were not seeking any financial compensation, it was a sign that they were refusing the takeout service options to make any amends. In this stage, it will take a lot of "convincing" to change the customer's opinion about the takeout service.

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