

Getting Your Restaurant Ready For The Holiday Season

By **Richard D. Williams**, Nov 22, 2002

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With the approach of the holiday season, most restaurant managers know that they should stock up on popular menu items, and if located in a snowy climate, they also stock up on snow melt, snow shovels, and discuss snow removal responsibilities with staff. However, the holiday season is not only about stringing up garland and spreading holiday cheer. With the holiday season rapidly approaching, now is a good time for restaurant owners and operators to refresh employee training on liquor and sex harassment policies.

For many restaurants, the month of December is the busiest month of the year. In addition to usual restaurant business, many restaurants are able to fully book party rooms or large tables with employer-sponsored holiday parties. These parties present the opportunity to sell food and liquor to those who may not frequent the restaurant on a regular basis, and as such, if a good job is done, may result in capturing the guest's business at other times of the year. Because many guests at holiday parties consume large quantities of alcohol, restaurant owners, managers and servers should be on the lookout for guests who are at or beyond their capacity. In addition, many restaurants host holiday parties for their own employees.

Typically, the employer hosting the party is also concerned about the consequences of an employee drinking too much. Under the law of many states, the employer will not be liable for injuries caused by intoxication, as long as the party is not held on the employer's premises, the party is voluntary, and the employee is driving his or her own vehicle; the employer, nevertheless, should take steps to reduce the likelihood of being found to have had a duty to supervise alcohol consumption. In booking a party, the owner or manager can discuss these concerns with the employer sponsor, and suggest various ideas for controlling alcohol consumption.

Typical ideas include drink tickets, limiting alcohol to wine and beer, well brands rather than premium brands of hard liquor, and not allowing shots. All of these have their disadvantages, and all can be defeated by a guest who is interested in over-imbibing. Some employers make announcements either before the party or at the party about drinking responsibly, and state that taxi vouchers will be available on an as-needed basis.

Some employers may even offer hotel rooms nearby so that employees can avoid driving home altogether. However, all too frequently, the taxi vouchers or hotel rooms go unused. As a result, the onus is on the restaurant managers and servers who are working the party to keep an eye on alcohol consumption. It can be awkward to cut off a guest at a party, but the restaurant manager or server can enlist the assistance of the employer sponsor representative in handling the situation.

Knowing when and how to "say when" to a customer is one of the hardest calls to make, because nine out of ten times you are going to lose the customer for life if you do it wrong. Some suggestions are:

1. Have the most amiable manager talk to the customer.
2. Never reverse your decision.
3. Never try to rationalize with an intoxicated customer.
4. Once you have cut off the customer and the customer understands that he or she has been cut off, change the subject immediately; remember the customer is intoxicated, use it to your advantage. Wrap a negative between two positives.
5. Lastly, tell the customer that you are going to buy him or her a drink the next time he or she comes into the restaurant and write it on the back of your business card ("effective tomorrow"), but no more tonight.

Another issue which arises during holiday parties is sex harassment. The employer sponsors of holiday parties are frequently concerned that holiday parties will result in instances of sex harassment, usually resulting from over-consumption of alcohol. Restaurant management also may be concerned that their servers will be harassed by guests. Consequently, this can be a good time to refresh employee training on handling instances of sex harassment, both by guests and by other restaurant employees. Management has the responsibility to: prevent sex harassment from occurring in the first place; stop sex harassment if and when it occurs; keep sex harassment from reoccurring, once it has been stopped; and prevent reprisals.



About Richard D. Williams

Richard D. Williams, MAI is the President of HVS Food & Beverage Services - Denver. Dick is a graduate of the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, is a certified general appraiser and a licensed real estate broker, and holds the MAI designation of the Appraisal Institute. Mr. Williams' appraisal and consulting services are grounded in his 40 years' experience in the restaurant business as a chef, managing partner, and owner of several restaurants, including the Buckhorn Exchange in Denver. Dick can be reached by telephone at 303-771-4104 or by email at dwilliams@hvs.com.

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Companies should either distribute, or include in an employee handbook, a policy prohibiting unlawful harassment; this includes not only a prohibition on sex harassment but also includes a broader prohibition against discrimination in violation of federal law. With regard to sex harassment, employees should be informed that they are expected to conduct themselves in a professional and businesslike manner at all times. It can be helpful to do role-playing training so that servers learn tactics for handling individuals who are attempting to harass them. Common tactics include learning preventive assertions, so that the guest is given the benefit of the doubt and a climate of good will is maintained. For example, saying, in a neutral tone of voice, that the behavior is making the server uncomfortable. Another common tactic is verbal aikido, in which the server can deliberately ignore the behavior, or can agree with the guest but ask for a change of behavior.

All too frequently, the number of sex harassment incidents actually increases after training sessions. Management needs to be firm and resolute, especially if they witness employees jokingly harass each other. Employees who perceive that management is lackadaisical about sexual harassment issues are far less likely to report any incidents. A suggestion is to have managers conduct individual interviews with each staff member and discuss sex harassment. The tone and content of the interviews will make it clear to staff that the topic is important to management.

If you would like more information on HVS Food & Beverage Services, please contact Richard Williams at williams@hvsinternational.com.

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