

A woman with long, wavy red hair is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a pink and white striped halter-neck top. In her hands, she holds a clear glass filled with a light-colored beverage, garnished with a lime wedge and a red straw. The background is a dimly lit bar with various bottles of alcohol, including one labeled 'VEDKA', and red and white striped awnings hanging from the ceiling.

Integrity & Ethics

How to Become a Better Bartender

Joseph Palmese

How to Become a Better Bartender

Lesson 5

Either you have it or you don't; but being honest with your customers and your co-workers, will make for a more successful operation. It is also one of the toughest of the key ingredients of a bartender's "makeup". It's not easy to convince a bartender that the ten drinks he didn't charge for will eventually have an adverse effect on his earnings. Give away too many drinks, and your tips can actually be reduced, give away even more, than your tips can go away completely *when* you get caught by management. The customers become uncomfortable, the company loses revenue, and you eventually lose your job. Integrity, *how do you rate?*

- Honesty
- Respect for coworkers and customers
- Pouring what the customer "actually" ordered and is paying for
- Drink comps - No free drinks for tips

The following thoughts and short stories are examples of a few ways a bartender has been caught stealing. Whether giving away a drink, eating food that you didn't pay for, taking beer or bottles of alcohol home for a private party, or simply just taking the money... *it's all considered stealing...* and it will never be condoned. With customized computer software, smart phones, security cameras and advanced Point of Sale systems now available, it's too easy to get caught; so don't even try. Your boss can be 3000 miles away and still check on you using the security app on his I-Phone; and even if you think that you are the smartest person in the room and would never get caught, look around, *there's always going to be someone a little smarter.*

"Partners"

Bar owner Joe was trying to find a bartender to work the night shift of his club. He needed someone he could count on and trust, because he didn't want to spend eighteen hours a day working; he loved his place... *but not that much.*

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After the initial thirty-minute interview, he showed his “new” bartender John, around the place, and went over the cash register located on the center of the back bar. After watching him work for a few minutes, Joe excused himself and went upstairs to his office. The office was small, but it was Joe’s escape from what goes on downstairs, and it was located on the second level, directly above the cash register that was behind the bar. A small hole in the floor gave John an excellent view of the bartender’s actions while standing in front of the register... *this was the second half of John’s “interview” process.*

As Joe watched, John moved behind the bar well and was friendly and professional with all of the customers that came in. He greeted them warmly, made their drinks and took their money to ring up the sale. Joe was feeling pretty good about his bartender selection. About an hour into his shift, Joe noticed that John was receiving a tip for his good service with almost every sale. For every four drinks he would ring up, he would place a tip into the “tip” jar next to the register three times, not too bad.

An hour later, Joe watched as John seemed to have forgotten to ring up a drink, and then again. It seemed like John was now only ringing up three of four drinks on the register, but he was still depositing the same amount in tips. Over the course of the next few hours, John was putting the money for one drink into the register, and the money for the next drink would go directly into his tip jar. One into the register... one into the tip jar... one into the register... one into the tip jar.

As John got closer to the end of his shift, he started putting *all* of the money directly into his tip jar, bypassing the cash register completely; Joe was troubled and more than a little pissed. He went running down the stairs to confront John, just as John was putting even more money into his jar. Joe proclaimed... *“What, we’re not partners anymore?”*

That was a long time ago, when Joe was considered “old school”, and was fine with John skimming a little off the top, but only as long as Joe could maintain a profit. It was before computers and inventory controls when a handshake was your bond. Today the “skimming” is approached as a “comp” check, and it will always be important for the club to be profitable to stay open.

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Tip of the day: Someone is always watching and both you... and the owner of the bar... are supposed to make money.

Misplaced confidence in technology

Many years ago, I was invited to preview a new concept, liquor in a gun, the new and improved way to pour faster and easier, and completely stop theft. A company contracted with a popular restaurant in the area for a demonstration and to install a system that would dispense alcohol from a gun while simultaneously ringing the drink on the register. A fool proof system that they guaranteed would stop theft. There were a dozen of us invited to watch the show, and all of us were either managers or owners of local bars and restaurants.

Everything was pre-set, from the price of the drinks to the amount of alcohol being dispensed. The alcohol being dispensed from the gun was set up in the liquor room. Push the button to pour a drink and it automatically rings up the total on the register, one drink or five, the correct sale would appear on the cash register. Added benefits were a reduced liquor cost, because the bottles used for the dispenser were cheaper half-gallon bottles, not quart or fifth size; and the alcohol poured was always an ounce, giving us complete inventory control.

We all watched in amazement as drink after drink was ordered and poured, with every cocktail appearing on the cash register. We were all mesmerized as to how simple our lives were about to become, until my friend Chuck became curious; he asked for and received permission to try it himself.

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Chuck walked behind the bar, inspected both the gun apparatus and the cash register, and then reached behind the register and unplugged it. He then picked up the gun and started to pour drinks, slowly at first, then a barrage of twenty. The well in front of the bartender station quickly filled with drinks, while the cash register remained silent. By simply unplugging one part of their new fool proof system, Chuck was able to pour as many drinks as he wanted with no record of a sale being registered. That gave a few of us the motivation to look deeper, and my forte had always been inventory control, so I ventured into the liquor room to inspect the alcohol dispenser. Anyone with access to the liquor room could manipulate the bottles, either substituting different, less expensive brand names; or simply refilling the existing half-bottles with cheaper well brands; a tactic that would also lower the bar's Pouring Cost, while deceiving the unknowing customer into thinking he was drinking, and paying for, a premium alcohol.

Tip of the day: There is no fool proof technology to stop theft; if employees have the lack of integrity to think stealing is acceptable, you can't stop them. when they get caught, it will be management's choice to either, teach them a better way, remove them, or legally prosecute them; but they will always get caught.

The Bartender/Server Partnership

Nothing is more common than the server and bartender connection when trying to make a little extra cash. Server Jean tells bartender Joe that she needs another Vodka Soda to replace a drink she spilled. Joe pours it but doesn't ring it up, and Jean goes off to deliver the drink to the customer. The drink was never actually spilled and Jean charges the customer for the drink; but will not be passing that money to the bar. She now can "pocket" the cost of that drink and the bar's pouring cost is now adversely affected. Working as a team, the bartender – server partnership can prove to be very profitable... until they get caught.

Tip of the day: It's a technology world and it has become way too easy for management to check the pouring cost of the bar. Bottles can now be weighed and/or scanned, to determine what your pouring cost and cash register receipts should be.

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Whether the server is doing this on her own, or she is working with the bartender and splitting the money at the end of the shift, they will eventually be caught and the resulting documentation may not be enough to legally prosecute... but it will always be enough for them to lose their job... and with it... their reputation

Common misconceptions

No one can see me, no one will ever catch me, no one is watching. I can work my shift while keeping the cash register draw open. I can leave money left on the bar to pay for a drink, on the bar for a short while, and then put it into my tip jar instead of the register, no one will notice. I'll only charge the customer for one or two drinks, give him many more than that, and I'm sure no one will notice how much he tips me.

I was the new night bartender and had been training behind the bar for almost an hour when Kurt, the "lead" bartender, decided to make it his personal business to show me how to rip off the new owner. He actually enjoyed showing me how easy it was, while she was sitting on the bar, in front of the cash register. A quick calculation told me that he was stealing one out of every five dollars that should have found its way into the cash register. This seemed to be a part of my bartending "101" training that my mentor, had apparently overlooked.

Kurt was all about Kurt... the bar would be full, and he decides to set up drinks for the whole bar... *on the "house"*. He would do this several times a night and never charge a customer a dime. At the end of the night, Kurt gets tipped very well for giving away drinks, but in reality, it's only temporary. If a bar isn't making money, eventually it will close, the owner goes broke, and the entire staff will be looking for work.... *who's wins?*

My two cocktail servers saw how troubled I was at the end of our shift and offered to take me out to breakfast and I jumped at the chance. Of course, it didn't hurt that they were both gorgeous, but I also needed to vent a little. I didn't want to lose my job, but I had some very real concerns about working with Kurt. The girls took me to a local diner and over coffee, they told me to relax, that Kurt was on borrowed time, and that he probably wouldn't last the week.

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My second day behind the bar with Kurt was an even more impressive disregard for his employer and my chosen profession. Kurt started his shift by taking a drink order for a couple of regular guests, two scotch rocks, at a cost of six dollars, and after putting the drinks in front of them, he took the twenty-dollar bill handed to him and went to the cash register to ring it up. He then opened the register, took out the fourteen dollars in change and gave it to the customers and never touched the keys. He then left the cash register draw open as he continued to pour drinks and collect the money, but never ringing up a drink.

This went on for about thirty minutes before he closed the draw and started to conduct himself appropriately. I was the conscientious “bar back” still in training. At the end of our shift, I was cleaning up the back bar and stainless area when Kurt stopped me from throwing away discarded fruit from the sink area. He explained that the cherries represented five dollars and the limes were ten dollars. Three limes and five cherries meant that he had ripped off another fifty-five dollars from the bar, and all he had to do was take it out of the register before closing out his shift.

A true professional realizes that it is a “partnership” and that everyone needs to win. If the owner is making money, the increased business means the staff is treated better, with more benefits. They will have job stability and will be making *more* money; but fortunately, Kurt didn’t last past my second day. As I finished up the shift by cleaning the bar, my manager informed me that Kurt was no longer with us and he was sure that I wouldn’t have any trouble on my own.

Tip of the day: You’re an employee until you start signing the checks. It’s not your bar or money, but you should always treat it like it is. Nothing goes unnoticed and someone is always watching.

Déjà vu

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I was managing a nightclub in Santa Ana and running out of time. I am one bartender short for our grand opening and had only one interview left. His name was Kurt and when he handed me his resume, all I could do was stare. He was selling me hard on how good he was, and his resume *was* impressive, but I just couldn't stop staring... *at the man that took a lot of pride in teaching me how to steal five years earlier...* I just sat there and let him finish selling himself. When done, I looked at him and asked, "*Kurt, you don't remember me do you?*" He looked at me a little harder, but I had changed, I was no longer the young and inexperienced ex-marine reporting for his first bartending job. My hair was longer and straighter, and I had a full mustache; a much different look than the short haired, clean-shaven kid that he had "trained".

When he still had no clue, I offered "*Hof's Hut, five years ago*". He just glared at me, picked up his resume and left... no goodbyes, no thank you for the opportunity, no "great to see you" comments, nothing... *how rude*.

Tip of the day: It's amazing how long a bad reputation can stay with you. no one is perfect, but you should try to learn from your mistakes.

Secret Shopper

We'll call him "Dan"... someone who made it into the restaurant exactly once every two weeks, for the entire two years that I worked there; and he was definitely considered a regular. It wasn't until much later that I found out that Dan, was referred to as a "spotter", someone employed to come into the bar and act as a customer; in an effort to "spot" anything the boss considered bad, from stealing money to bad service, his job was to catch us in the act and write us up for management review.

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It was obvious that Dan didn't like me at all, but he could never catch me doing anything wrong. His only beef was when he would sit at my bar for hours, (along with every other regular customer), and never once saw me write down a drink order or close out a tab; and until he did, he wouldn't be able to accuse me of giving away a drink or stealing. His job was to watch what I was ringing up on the register; but he normally would have to leave before I did and the only tab I would have closed would have been his. My Hof's Hut training really paid off in spades for this one, I had been able to remember 100 drinks at a time, this bar only had twenty-two bar stools, piece of cake.

Of note, my boss, the owner of the bar, was the recipient of the worst bar write-up of the restaurant's history; he always gave away drinks when he was behind the bar, and had been known to take money out of the register for no apparent reason. It's a good thing the "spotter" was on his payroll and not the other way around.

Tip of the day: Whether it's the staff, customers, friends, or the eye-in-the-sky, someone is always watching.

Ego's and the results (customers love to brag)

One of my very good customers, Mark, would come in often to socialize with the rest of the core group of regulars; a friendly man who usually showed up with his girlfriend, *never* his wife. A few cocktails, a little conversation, and they would be off to their car or a local hotel room. No one in the bar could ever remember meeting his wife, so it never seemed quite as bad as it really was.

It is usually not about the money, but most regular customers expect a "free" drink; and Mark was no exception... regardless of how much they had to drink. I was pretty good at making sure that no one noticed, especially my managers; what I hadn't counted on was Mark. I had never realized just how much customers liked to brag.

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Standing in his usual corner, one of my other customers, Greg, noticed that Mark wasn't charged for one out of every three drinks. Mark was first to point out that *he* was the best customer at the bar, so it's only natural that he should receive a free drink or two. Greg said nothing at the time, but Mark hadn't realized that Greg also considered *himself* the best customer at the bar.

Greg was extremely upset because he rarely received a free drink; he might have been a regular, but no one really liked him. Greg told a manager, that manager told the general manager, and he told me to knock it off; or I'm gone. I'm very sure Mark had no clue what he was starting, but the only two people it really affected were Mark and me. He no longer received anything free, and he eventually went from five days a week on my bar to one; and I lost the tips on the other four days.

Tip of the day: If a bartender does their job right, all of your regular customers will consider themselves to be your best customer. a "free" drink is considered stealing if it's not recorded as a "comp"; and it's only a matter of time before you're caught; either by management, by staff, or by the customers. reality check... *you have no control over any of it.*

Inventory and comp's

Keeping track of your inventory isn't hard, and there are now many systems in place to make it even easier. From weighing bottles to Point of Sales systems that can tell you exactly how much you sold and how much inventory you should have left. Inventory should always be conducted either daily, weekly, or monthly; and management and staff should always be held accountable. Comp tabs are always an object of contention between management and bartenders. Who should receive them? Food? Cocktails? Both? Regular customers love to go where everyone knows their name, not necessarily where they get free drinks. I have seen customers leave because they received too much for free and they felt uncomfortable.

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Giving a customer a “free” appetizer serves several purposes, but the most important is that they feel special. Giving away food will still allow the customer to buy a drink. Giving away a drink, the customer may only have one and may not buy food. Another thought is for management to give a bartender a dollar amount for comps every month. This dollar amount could be paid to the bartender on his paycheck or not. If he doesn’t use it, he can be rewarded with a slightly larger paycheck.

Tip of the day: Giving away a drink without recording it is wrong, and never give away all the drinks. a customer will not usually tip you all of the money he should have paid for all of the drinks, and most would like at least a starting point so that a percentage of a sale can be used.

Ethics

If you work at an establishment where employees are not reprimanded for bad behavior, aren’t given consideration for good behavior, but even worse, not paid any attention to at all; all it will take is one dishonest person to lower the standard for us all. From giving away a few drinks, to not charging a “good” customer for anything at all; one dishonest person can set the “bar” so low that it will leave employees who care about their job, between a rock and hard place.

If the dishonest employee has been around for a long time, skimming a few extra dollars on every drink can become common place; and the lack of supervision, in a sense, becomes their acknowledgement that they aren’t doing anything wrong. New employees often look to them for guidance, and how they handle things, and will follow that same standard, without ever asking if that was a decision made from the top down or just one that was decided solely by that employee who believes that they are “entitled” to make a few extra dollars.

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In the long run, this adds up to a lot of money lost by the company, and more than likely some good employees along the way; just because employees put their integrity and ethics on a different level. Personally, I have worked for corporations for many years, and I cannot put a price on my integrity, work ethic, or morals; and *really...* your job is not worth losing for an extra couple of dollars; not to mention compromising my industry reputation.

Bartenders may be granted the right to use a comp check each night (within reason), to buy drinks for regulars, friends, family, special occasions, and so on. This privilege, in my opinion, leaves no reason to skim anything; unfortunately for some, that simply is not enough. The owner and management of the establishment I work for shares my view, and greatly values and appreciates our regular customers. They realize that during slow times, they are the reason that we can keep things going. Management has voiced their collective opinion to allow us to take extra care of those people... which means a more generous pour than others, a mid-course sent out by the chefs, a complimentary dessert etc... this does not, however, allow for an hourly employee to serve a twenty-dollar beverage to a guest and ring in one of lesser value.

One evening, while I was doing a last call, I had a bar regular and someone I viewed as a friend even outside of work; confronted me about a twenty-dollar beverage that I had served to him two nights previously. He was drunk, so at first, I kept my cool and just explained my side of the story to him; but he couldn't seem to see it thru my eyes. This man is young, but an extremely successful businessman, in a very tough, competitive industry. As we continued to "disagree", our voices started to get louder, and louder as we both tried to get our point across, but to no avail, and ultimately, we got nowhere.

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He has always been very generous in the gratuity department, and never has a problem buying drinks for old friends, new friends, ladies, and really, just about anyone in general, on most of the nights he is out. He is definitely one of my "A-Team" regulars because he is fun, polite, and generous. Sometimes, however, when people spend a lot of money in an establishment, and have been taken good care by the employees, they often fail to realize how we are reciprocating. They tend to develop a sense of entitlement and of course, even more so when they have had more than a few drinks. They lose track of how many times they receive a more generous pour, and more timely service, and that our way of saying thank you maybe to make sure that we put their service ahead of everyone else.

The end result of our argument was basically that he thought that because he comes in all the time, I should've poured him this expensive beverage and rang in a less expensive one. My rebuttal was that he called for that beverage by name, while looking at a menu that reflected the price, while sober. We work in a very nice establishment and are instructed never to disclaim to a guest that a beverage is "expensive"; because everything is relative and could be viewed as offensive to the guest; and of course, because I know this gentleman has no problem buying expensive beverages, he's the last person I would have tried to warn about the cost of something.

He has had some very expensive nights, where his check has been nearly \$1,000, but with that being said... I still do not have the ability, nor would I, charge a bar regular less money for a glass of wine that had a specific cost. It's not about the money, his check was almost a hundred dollars and as he's arguing with me, he's filling in a two-hundred-dollar tip. Sometimes, the hardest thing a bartender has to do is determine if that customer is drunk?
Or just plain stupid.

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When that customer reminds me that he has money, while telling me to remember this two-hundred dollar tip the next time he comes in, is something a good bartender should never have to live through, but yet it can happen often. I tried to explain to him that his tip wasn't necessary, and that this wasn't worth me losing my job, or compromising my ethics and morals for. The cocktails, and the argument, just puffed up his ego; he replied that he could put a million dollars cash in my bank account tomorrow, (which he actually could), and that if I got fired for giving him an expensive beverage at a difference price that I would still be able to find another job.

There are a lot of employees that would be willing to rollover on this one and take the gratuity, but my morals are far more important to me, and that's before my personal "attitude" kicks in. Dealing with this situation purely based on principle wasn't a choice for me; and I chose to stand my ground. I did not adjust the credit card balance to reflect the tip because I wasn't comfortable being put in a place where I felt like I owed this guy something, or allowing him to dangle that as the reason why I should do certain things for him in the future... I'm sure that someday things might change, and I might have a price, but not today.

Whenever I am put in a compromising position while working, I always try to handle it in a way that will allow me to have a clear conscience; and allow me to sleep at night. This altercation with a bar regular and friend of mine had me so shook up, that after I had closed and let everyone out, I almost burst into tears and spent the next thirty minutes trying to calm down; but I could hold my head high returning to work for my next shift. I hadn't overstepped my boundaries as an hourly employee, and I did do the right thing in that given situation.

Tip of the day: No matter what happens at other establishments; it's always situational, and you should never expect something for nothing. if you cannot afford to go out and pay full price at the bar you almost always get a deal from; then simply do not go out. Years later, this bartender's ethics are still intact, and she still loves and respects the profession.

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Here I was, sitting at my favorite sports bar with a couple of regular customers. My friend Suzie leaned over to whisper that her drink was “weak” and started to complain about the day bartender. She wished that the other bartender, who was just starting his shift, had poured her drink. Now that comment definitely got my attention. First, the day bartender is amazing and follows the bars rules implicitly. She doesn’t give away a drink, but she also doesn’t short pour; she knows her shit and does the job well. Second, the night bartender is an entitled dick and Susie, along with a large number of regulars including myself, usually have nothing good to say about him.

Apparently, our night bartender had a conversation with Suzie several days ago, about how he was always pouring her essentially a “double” and how much he appreciated her. He informed her that every time he pours a double, he reaches into his pocket and pays for it from his own money. The house had strict rules about giving away drinks and overpouring; and this was his way of taking care of his better customers... sound great doesn’t it?

Unfortunately, it was total bullshit; and the math doesn’t add up. A bartender’s base salary is an hourly wage, and in most cases it’s not enough to cover pouring one drink an hour, let alone several drinks per regular customer. Even if his tips were good, he still has personal bills to pay and wouldn’t be able to pay them if he is working for free.

Once the night guy had Suzie convinced that she was receiving a double with every drink... and she could usually handle three or four before calling it quits; when she paid her tab, she felt obligated to tip more than she usually would have to help offset the money her new favorite bartender was paying on her behalf.

The end result of having the night bartender lying so that he can take advantage of his place of business and his customers is this. The bartender was in violation of the house’s rules, the establishment was getting ripped off, and their pouring cost was much higher than it should be. The day bartender’s reputation went from great to the worst on staff because the night guy had regulars convinced that she was ripping them off by short-pouring... which now affected her tips, and *she also has bills to pay.*

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Tip of the Day: Your customers, the staff, and people in general... love to talk: and there is absolutely nothing you can say that doesn't eventually come back to bite you in the ass.

My friend Tina and I were on the look out for our next bar venture. We spent every weekend visiting local bars that we were told were listed for sale. Our combined experience in the industry was well north of 50 years and we didn't think we had anything new to learn... at least not until we entered this little dive bar in a southern district of Long Beach, California. Its reputation in the area was well know. An established, busy place that was owned by a very knowledgeable man who as apparently lost his interest in the game. It was an interesting first impression with two pool tables, no table seating, and a long, 20-stool bar covering one side of the room.

The owner only came in to collect the money for deposit every couple of days and he allowed his shift bartenders to control everything from the ordering and inventory control... to the hours that they worked... he had checked out of the business and hence he was selling.

Tina and I found a couple of empty stools in the middle of the bar and started taking mental notes. It was a tactic we had used often and would then share our opinions after we left. The bartender, Kathy, was a little sloppy but very congenial and she kept her entire bar entertained. We ordered a couple of drinks and started a tab. We watched as Kathy worked her bar and were enjoying the show; at least until it was time for her to end her shift and she started closing out her tabs.

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Tina and I were first, and she told us that it would be \$36.00 (more than reasonable for the 6 drinks we had ordered). I handed her \$50 and said thank you. The service was good, and she had entertainment value, so we felt the tip was justified. It wasn't until she rang up \$18.00 and put the rest in her tip jar. The three individuals sitting at the corner of the bar all got their checks and each one was rung up and apparently, they tipped well. The couple next to us had been there considerably longer and their bill came to \$90.00. They gave Kathy a hundred-dollar bill, but this time, she didn't even bother to ring anything up... the hundred found its way directly into her tip jar. Tina and I totally understood why it was time for the owner to sell the place, so we decided to go in, every day, for the next week.

It was business as usual. Every bartender that served us had the same basic, stinky finger attitude. They were all stealing, and it seemed as if all of the regular customers knew it. It was almost as if they had made a deal with each shift bartender; the customers got more than they actually paid for, and the bartenders put most of it in their pockets. Tina and I could only guess that the bartenders knew the place was for sale and were trying to cover these asses.

Tip of the day: When the bartenders found out that Tina and I were trying to buy the place, they gave us *all* of our drinks for free. Big... huge... mistake... because if our offer had been accepted, we would have fired all of them on the spot.

When the owner of the bar decided not to accept our offer; he kept the place and did a face lift. During the time it took to clean the place up, he fired the entire staff anyway. Was the extra couple of bucks they stole worth their job?