Restaurants know that bringing guests through their front door is the first step to making a profit. Hence, restaurants are obliged to make the seating and reservation procedures as smooth and fair as possible in order to elevate the total quality of the customer experience. Seating procedures that show courtesy and care for the guest aids in building a pleasant first impression, whether your restaurant accepts reservations or not.

**Managing Customer Flow**

Note that when it comes to seating guests, communication between the host or hostess, management team and kitchen staff is needed to direct and organize guests. Keep in mind the following suggestions to effectively care for patrons.

* **Welcome guests.** The host or hostess is responsible for greeting and welcoming guests. He or she will also take guests to a table to be seated, or provide a wait-time if a table is not readily available. They often take care of reservations as well, although sometimes a reservationist or manager is responsible.

* **Communicate.** Communication between restaurant staff is highly important. Although the host or hostess is the main director of guest flow at the front of the restaurant, the wait time estimations require input from a manager. The manager communicates with kitchen staff and servers to figure out how long the orders are taking to fulfill and how long present customers are taking to eat.

* **Work quickly and efficiently.** An efficient, speedy shift from the kitchen staff means more parties can be served more quickly, which calms impatient patrons on a busy weekend and helps turn more tables.

* **Turn tables.** When servers finish up with one party and clear the table for another, this is called "turning the table." Restaurants like to seat as many parties as possible while maintaining quality service, but turning tables more quickly eliminates long wait times and increases revenue.

**Customer Perception**

Often, skewed customer perceptions are the cause of discontent in the Front of the House (FOH). Problems may include the following issues:

* **A long wait time**

* **A long wait even with a reservation**

* **Restaurants that do not accept reservations**
* Tables that look available but are reserved

Many of these issues are often mere misunderstandings. A customer without a reservation may see the empty tables and become irritated that he has to wait. These tables are often reserved for a party that may arrive in a few minutes. Additionally, factors like time of day, weekends, holidays and community events can affect wait times or reservation availability. Gentle and polite explanations and perhaps a comped appetizer or drink can assuage most guests and create a great impression of service.

**Taking Reservations**

Restaurants make it a goal to fill as many seats as possible every shift, while still maintaining high standards of food and service. Many restaurants take reservations in order to assist guests or parties whose plans require a specific seating time. Guests can make reservations over the phone or online. Do the following before starting or when critiquing a reservation system.

* Consider restaurant layout. The layout in a restaurant also has a good deal to do with the reservations the restaurant is able to take. Some managers emphasize that this is one of the most important aspects of the reservation system. Table shapes, table sizes and booths can all affect the types of parties you are able to reserve.

* Manage large groups. Large parties of eight or more can be a challenge to reserve, especially if the restaurant layout involves mainly booths. In a crunch, a manager can offer the large group creative seating arrangements, or else suggest that the reservation be booked for a slightly earlier or later time.

* Hold tables appropriately. Managers at restaurants that accept reservations need to remain constantly aware of the customer flow for the entire shift. Some restaurants will hold an empty table for only 20 to 30 minutes prior to the reserved party's arrival, if tables are turned quickly. Others will ensure that the table is clear and held for over an hour.

* Utilize technology. Many restaurants are channeling reservation requests through in-house technology such as OpenTable software and computer devices. Coupled with Internet sites such as OpenTable.com, technology like this can make reservation management and seating much more convenient and efficient.

* Ask for a credit card. Sometimes restaurants take credit card information when the customer places the reservation request. This way, the customer is aware that his card will be charged a fee if his party does not fulfill the reservation.

**Not All Restaurants Take Reservations**

Not every restaurant will accept guest reservations. They may decide to stop taking reservations altogether, or they may have never done it to begin with. This can cause dismay among some guests, but restaurants usually have their reasons.

**Advantages & Disadvantages of Taking Reservations**
* Special occasions. When a couple or a party wants to enjoy a special occasion such as an anniversary, holiday or other celebratory event, they want to make sure they can get a table without waiting too long.

* Fairness. Some restaurants are so popular that they may require patrons to make a reservation weeks or even months in advance. To be fair, some restaurants decide to run a purely first-come, first-served business. Wait times can be extremely long at places like this, but booking reservations for months in advance can be even more extreme.

* Higher checks. Customers often make reservations for large parties or special occasions. These parties tend to spend more money at the restaurant, which in turn increases revenue.

* Absent patrons. When the reserving party never shows up, sales suffer from the lost business. Additionally, filling up the reservation book and holding tables for the parties may force a restaurant to turn away other sales-generating patrons.

* Planning ahead. When restaurants are aware of the reservations for the night, they may be able to better plan the preparation required to serve them. This is especially true for large parties, such as reservations being made for 10-20 people.

* Changes in party numbers. Sometimes a reservation is changed without notice, such as the arrival of additional guests or children. When a restaurant makes plans to hold a table that accommodates four, only to have a party of seven arrive, table arrangements and seating plans need to change. This takes time and causes longer waits.

**Alternatives to Reservations**

Restaurants that do not accept reservations or restaurants that no longer have the capacity to accept further reservations on a given night may choose alternative methods to accommodate their guests. Use the following methods to organize waiting patrons and streamline the seating process:

* The waiting list. When patrons arrive, they are invited to submit their names to a waiting list. The parties are called in order whenever tables become available. Unlike reservations, this does not involve holding a table and will most often require a short wait.

* The call-ahead list. Much like a waiting list, the customer can call the restaurant, ask how long the wait is, and ask to be put on the waiting list over the phone. The customer then arrives within the appropriate frame of time and receives the next available table.

* Pagers. Many restaurants employ electronic pagers in lieu of calling out patron names when tables are ready. These devices flash, vibrate and sometimes make noise when a table is available for their party. The downfall is that they may not function if patrons walk off the premises.

Source: Monica Parpal for Foodservice Warehouse