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Servers Beware: That Customer May Be A Mystery Shopper For The Boss

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How Else Can Managers Tell If Help Is Giving Good Service or Selling High Profit Menu Items?

By Clare Anberry

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

COLUMBUS, Ohio—No one at Schmidt's Sausage Haus seems to notice the man in the pink sweater who is sipping a beer at the bar. But he sees everything.

Robert Welcher studies the bartender, the busboy, the hostess, even the polka band.

"Look at this," says Welcher, nodding nonchalantly at the frosty mug before him. To the untrained eye, it looks like a tall beer, dark German brew being the specialty here.

Something's missing, he whispers. But what? Beer nuts?

No. It's the head on the beer. A one-inch head would represent that much less beer and therefore 20% more profit, he confides. Robert Welcher has seen enough.

The Dick Tracy of diners downs the defective draft and dashes to his next assignment: a popular cafe lately notorious for having service problems.

The Purposes Served

Mr. Welcher, you see, is a Shopper" (the term people in the profession apply to themselves). The founder of Restaurant Consultants Inc. and the company's mystery shoppers shop on behalf of restaurant

owners eager to know how their employees measure up—and how their establishments rate.

This sort of surveillance isn't all that new. For years, bar owners hired private detectives to catch sticky-fingered bartenders, while fast-food operations—whose hobgoblin is inconsistency—have paid people to look after quantity control.

Mr. Welcher, who himself has owned and operated four restaurants, knows from experience. When he was on the premises, one of his bartenders smiled, spoke in complete sentences and had the charm of Miss Manners. But when Welcher left, the bartender would often turn on the football game and tune out the customers.

Welcher says the owner of one local restaurant who hired him was unaware that his favorite server had a weakness for profanity. The benighted employer refused to believe what he had been told, so one of Restaurant Consultant's shoppers was wired for sound. "Damn, if she didn't swear again," said the shopper. Cased closed.

Occupational Hazards

Mr. Welcher and his assistants, working in teams, arrive at client's restaurant armed with a mental checklist of hundreds of

times. They discreetly inspect dumpsters and fingernails; both should be relatively clean. The operatives look for burnout (employees and light bulbs). They count french fries, to make sure that hamburger and chicken sandwich customers get equal treatment, and to prove that shoppers aren't just interested in profit but also in value.

He insists that, too, that his company's purpose in shopping isn't to get a body fired. Employees are notified that their restaurants are to be "shopped." Besides, he notes, "employers invest thousands of dollars in people, and the last thing they want is turnover."

Restaurant Consultant's shoppers life might seem enviable inasmuch as it involves doing something for free that others must pay for. Eating and drinking don't sound like hard work. But to go from sauerkraut to smoked oysters, and from oompah band to rock 'n' roll, in one night can be a trip from headache to heartburn. And it is certainly no job for an anorexic. Welcher once ate his way from Los Angeles to San Diego for a client, stopping at a succession of restaurants researching products. He says he gained 10 pounds.

At Schmidt's here during a two-day stretch, and for the sake of verisimilitude, he consumed four Bahama Mama's (a spicy smoked, beef sausage). But usually, Welcher maintains, he makes a point of grazing-tasting a little bit of a lot of things. And he works out at a gym three or four times a week to keep from becoming a bratwurst blimp.

Qualifying as a shopper requires more than an eclectic appetite and elastic waistband. Each of Restaurant Consultants, Inc. shoppers must have

experience in the restaurant business.

But they must perfect being subtle.

Holding a fork up to the light to look for dried gunk isn't the way to do it. Taking two gulps of beer, glancing left and right, and quickly departing are also frowned upon. Mr. Welcher furthermore advises against taking notes on napkins. It is too obvious. (His shoppers generally repair to their cars and confide their findings to a tape recorder.)

Thieves Everywhere

Andrew Schmidt, who owns Schmidt's Sausage Haus, says he enlisted Restaurant Consultant's help this year, shortly after a new federal law told employers they could no longer force workers to submit to lie detector tests except under certain circumstances. "Unfortunately, in the bar industry. 90 of employees working in lounges steal from you," he claims.

Soon enough, one of Restaurant Consultant's shoppers alerted Welcher that an inexperienced bartender was illegally awarding free drinks to customers who beat the house in darts and backgammon. A thousand-dollar fine from the Ohio Department of Liquor Control could have been the result.

Welcher says another local restaurant was hemorrhaging the equivalent of 360 fifths of whiskey a month because the friendly bartender was courting big tips with strong drink and was treating his buddies to free rounds after their Tuesday night softball game.

Restaurant Consultants, Inc. "shoppers" visit a business at least twice a month. Their numerical rating system awards average food and service a five. That is what the waiter gets who adheres to company policy and asks customers if they would like dessert, but does it without flair. Adding a smile might win him a six, touting the "luscious cream puff" warrants an eight or a nine.

Out of the Wine

The trendy cafe with the service problems gets a mixed review from

Welcher, who doesn't want the place identified in print—he might lose the account. It doesn't have a hostess, and Mr. Welcher has to wait... and wait for a table. The restaurant no longer sells the 1996 Chardonnay listed on the menu. The waiter, whom Welcher calls the "wham-bam-man," but not to his face, pops a wine cork as if he is opening champagne and rips the metal foil around the neck of the bottle so it hangs like torn drapes. "Unprofessional," sighs Welcher.

As for the food, the smoked oysters are great, but the corn chowder is thin and tastes like Cheez Whiz. He never gets dessert: The waiter announces that anyone wanting sweets should say so forthwith because the chef wants to go home.

If the trendy waiter is the wham-bam-man, Schmidt's bartender is Mr. Molasses. Welcher, doing his job, wants another beer. But his near-empty mug sits there for two minutes that seem like forever to a thirsty customer. Finally, Welcher picks up the mug and drains the last few drops, theatrically holding the empty vessel to his lips for a good for a good five seconds. All to no avail.

Later, Welcher lingers at a case lined with bratwurst to see if anyone will try to unload a link. Schmidt's employees are supposed to push takeouts. No one does. So he asks for the sausage and waits to see if the clerk will try to up-sell him mustard or buns. She doesn't.

Outside, he shakes his head and mimics the clerk's "Want anything else?" He's upset. "That's really selling," he says. "I did everything but says, 'Pleeeeee sell me something.'"

The way Welcher and his clients see it, restaurant service staff is like car salesmen. They are supposed to push the deluxe, and all the options. They should favor words like hot, huge, sizzling and outrageous. Restaurant Consultant also teaches service staff to pronounce some tricky, but favored words. Smart

servers, for instance know to suggest the roast beef oh-ZHOO with fresh LEY-gooms.

Restaurant Consultant, Inc. even provides software to produce service procedure manuals and certification testing. He believes that restaurant owners should specify the standards of service and selling prior to initiating mystery shopping services. And that mystery shopping obligates service personnel to perform up the standards of the restaurant.