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# TEA ALMANAC



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# STEERING *the* SHIP

EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE  
STARTS WITH YOU

*by Cora Dasseur*



**TEA CHAT:** Owner Nicole Basso strives to deliver top-notch customer service at Sip Tea Lounge in Huntington, N.Y.

**F**or teahouse operators, each day you open your doors provides you with the opportunity to introduce customers to the wonderful world of tea. In the confines of your business, guests can take a trip around the globe, sampling cultures and spanning time. Tea lovers will likely have a good time visiting your tea establishment, but you can play a role in determining exactly *how* good a time they have with the level of customer service you provide.

Truth be told, there isn't a complicated formula to caring for your patrons. "Customer service is a sterile name for having a conversation," says Bruce Richardson, co-owner of Elmwood Inn Fine Teas and a former teahouse operator. "It's not about a 'tea of the day' or meeting a quota. It's about fine-tuning a tea to the palate of the customer that builds trust between you and the customer."

Every second is an opportunity to educate and empower people about tea while creating a bond that will keep them coming back and telling others about your business. What follows are some tips to help your tea store provide the best possible service.

#### **PROVIDE THE LAY OF THE LAND.** After greeting your guests, introduce them to the

shop. Explain the layout and what you can offer them. At Babs & Coco's Tea Emporium, the shop I co-owned with my mom in DeKalb, Ill., we had more than 100 teas and herbals. Some of our new guests would confess they felt overwhelmed, and many would tell us they didn't know there were so many teas out there. Your job is to put people at ease as you present your offerings.

**ASK QUESTIONS AT THE OUTSET.** If you inquire about your customers' tea familiarity and preferences, you'll quickly learn what they need and how you can best serve them. Start by asking them what teas they drink. At our shop, if a customer stated they preferred English Breakfast, for example, we would show them our other breakfast blends and explain the differences between them. Sometimes we would turn those customers onto our Scottish blend, which was the strongest of the breakfast blends and offered a fuller body than the English Breakfast.

Richardson says asking questions can also help clear up miscon-

ceptions—for example, about tea's caffeine content. If a customer asks for a caffeine-free tea, Richardson advises inquiring whether they're going caffeine-free for medical reasons. If they have a heart palpitation, they'll need a caffeine-free herbal. But if they're simply sensitive to caffeine, they might consider a less caffeinated tea if you explain why you're suggesting it. If you learn the "why" behind customers' preferences, you can provide great service by giving them options.

**WELCOME EXPLORATION.** After the intro, we liked to let people explore at their leisure. Displaying your teas so guests can see and smell them is vital. We had glass jars in front of each tea so guests



**SERVICE PRO:** Michelle Phelps, co-owner of Tranquil Tea Lounge in Fullerton, Calif. stresses the importance of reading customers in order to provide them with the best service.

COURTESY OF TRANQUIL TEA LOUNGE

could see and smell the tea. The Sip Tea Lounge in Huntington, N.Y., attaches boxes to metal strips on the wall using magnets.

Some customers simply will have never seen loose leaf before, so presenting them with the different shapes, styles and colors in an eye-catching way can help pique their curiosity and ease them into the experience.

As they get acclimated and comfortable, they start to see what they're drawn to.

**OFFER INFORMATION.** As customers learn more about the different tea types, some will inquire about their origins. Richardson recommends posting photos on your walls of tea gardens you work with or other representations of tea at the source—it's a practice he used at his tearoom. "I can point to it and say, 'That's a woman in Darjeeling picking this tea. That's a tea bush,'" he says. This approach helps create connections between customers and the tea, which in turn increases their appreciation of the product.

Sometimes a tea has an interesting origin story or legend—if so, tell that tale to customers. “The story sells the tea,” says Richardson. The story of *mao feng* was a popular one in our shop—the version we told was of an academic who fell in love with a tea worker and planned to marry her, but the tea worker’s landlord was also in love with her. Upon hearing her plans to run off with the academic, the landlord kidnapped the tea worker and locked her in his house. The landlord killed the academic to prevent him from rescuing her. The tea worker escaped on the eve of her wedding to the landlord, discovered the academic had been killed and went to his grave. She sat and cried until she became the rain, and from his grave grew the tea we know as *mao feng*.

**SAMPLE AWAY.** After customers fall in love with a tea’s scent, brew them a sample. We’ve all had disappointing experiences where we bought food or



drink expecting to enjoy it, only to discover it wasn’t what we were looking for once we got it home and tried it. It’s not a good feeling to be stuck with something you don’t like, so the sampling process helps mitigate the chances of that happening.

If guests are curious and enthusiastic during the sampling process, you can mention any events coming up. These can give customers an opportunity to learn more in a safe environment and meet other tea connoisseurs in training. Tasting evokes memories, and Richardson recommends letting guests talk. We had one professor who was a devout Lapsang Souchong drinker because he drank it in college, and he told us about it reminding him of discovering philosophy.

**CONVERSE WISELY.** The time spent brewing tea, whether during sampling or in normal tea service, will always give you a great opportunity to bond with

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your guests. Our shop had a tea bar where guests could sit at the bar while we brewed. One advantage was we were in a college town, so there were natural questions for us to ask: Do you go to school up here or teach at the university? What's your major? Why did you decide on that? What do you love about it?

One secret to providing excellent customer service is remembering that people love to talk about themselves. Asking customers "how" and "why" questions shows you're interested in them, and it's an effective way to get them to open up about their values, their passions, and their hopes and dreams. **This process will likely help them feel more at ease and will endear your shop to them.** Heck, it might even make your tea taste better to them in that moment.

On your end, having candid conversations that delve past surface level will help you remember guests when they return. If they last visited you to buy caffeinated tea to give them a boost while



**TASTING:** Jonathan Phelps, co-owner of Tranquil Tea Lounge (standing), helps introduce customers to teas through cupping.

they studied for midterms, your natural follow up question can be, "How did everything go? How did the tea work out?" People will often be quite moved that you remembered them.

**GIVE THEM SPACE.** Some people do not want to be worked with, no matter what you do. Maybe they're in a rush, or maybe they're having a bad day. Either way, as the person providing service, don't take it personally. Nicole Basso, owner of the Sip Tea Lounge in Huntington, N.Y., has learned this firsthand. "Some people might not want to talk, and that's OK," she says. "[Tea is] a vacation for your mind. They might need a minute to focus, and tea helps you focus."

Reading people comes into play, and if someone appears to be seeking solitude, try to respect that preference while still serving them like any other customer. "When serving guests, we can get an idea in regards to whether or not they enjoy a lot of interaction," says Michelle Phelps, co-owner of Tranquil Tea Lounge in Fullerton, Calif. "For those guests that like to keep to themselves, we will respect their need to have space. We do not ignore these guests, but will check in with them occasionally."

**TALK TO THEM ABOUT MAKING IT.** Before a customer leaves your shop with tea to brew at home, make sure they're well-versed in its preparation. "Be able to talk about the proper apparatus," says Richardson, so you can avoid the unfortunate occurrence of your customer making fine tea with a poor method, resulting in a disappointing cup. After finding out when and how a customer likes to drink tea, offer a couple brewing solutions.

At Tranquil Tea Lounge, Phelps will stress to customers that not all tea is brewed the same way. "We also teach our guests about the different water temperatures and steeping times

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needed to prepare each variety of tea," she says. "Our goal is to share our passion and educate our guests on the different varieties."

**CREATING SOMETHING SPECIAL.**

Providing great service can create bonding experiences with your customers that are magical for both sides. At the Sip Tea Lounge, a father and son have come in since the shop's inception. Because Basso is a runner, the three of them talked about running, which eventually inspired the father and son to train and enter a triathlon where the son was the youngest competitor. "The father was so proud of his son for doing it," shares Basso. "The son was so happy and proud of himself."



Tranquil Tea has a reputation for being a good "date place," so Phelps has served many couples navigating the romantic waters. "We've seen couples go on their first dates, then sometimes we get to be a part of the surprise proposal, engagement photo sessions and then later down the road they will hold their bridal shower at the tea lounge ... then a year or two later their baby shower."

Many of us find sanctuary in the ways of tea. Invite others to discover the same sanctuary, and they may find a world where they feel welcome, heard and encouraged to explore. ☺

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