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Creating Community One Meal at a Time

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Doctors heal.

Professors educate.

Psychologists listen.

Entertainers excite.

I get to do all of the above, on stage each night, as I serve dinner. They say the best way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I think the same is true no matter the gender; a meal shared is a memory made.

It is precisely this notion that led me to study hospitality administration and commit to a successful career in the industry, but more importantly, to embody a lifestyle of hospitality. I would define this as one of humanity – a moral foundation and compass, or what I would refer to, as being a compassionate, altruistic human being, who selflessly cares for others.

It can be argued that the hospitality industry began during the 15th century with the opening of the first hotel in France, or later around 1765 in Paris, with Monsieur Boulanger opening the first known restaurant. Hospitality, seen through my lens dates much farther back though, to the times of Abraham and Sarah.

We learn from Genesis 18:1-9 of the Old Testament, “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My Lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.”^[1]



The lessons that Abraham provides us with here are plenty. Abraham does not wait for a plea of aid. He not only advances, but he runs to the strangers and petitions them to be his guests. In preparation, Abraham offers the first, best portions – “choice flour” and a calf “tender and good”. He doesn’t just throw a meal together; he and Sarah prepared a feast. Hospitality fosters good relationships, and Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality provides an early biblical insight into the way relationships and breaking bread go hand in hand. These strangers gained a deeper understanding of each other by sharing a meal and an extended encounter. This remains true today. When people break bread and gather around the table together, they often grow to understand and appreciate each other more intimately. Better working relationships and more effective communication are often born out of hospitality.

Fast forward a few thousand years and today, the hospitality industry employs around 292 million people globally, roughly 1 in every 10 people on the planet.^[ii] Trends and data suggest these figures will continue to rise and with that, technological advances and implementation within the industry are aiming and executing to provide faster, smarter and more cost efficient service. On top of the impact that the industry makes on our economy, hospitality as an accredited curriculum has gained major esteem and there are over 240 Bachelor's degrees in Hospitality Management offered in the United States alone.^[iii]

The phrase “time is money” has never been truer than today. You can check out your own groceries at the store (that is, if you left your house, given that leaving is no longer necessary with instant delivery services), order coffee from your phone to avoid wasted time spent in line and even order a meal and pay for it all without the need for an actual, human server. For many, this looks and feels like progress; to me, all of this “efficiency” is an alarming step in the wrong direction.



Today's generations are blessed with many gifts such as longer life expectancies, easier access to medical supplies, clean water and healthier foods and ingenious technologies unlike any we've ever experienced. With all this advancement, we are also witnessing some of the most backward political times filled with racial inequality and widespread hatred as well as a drug crisis, a country riddled with mental illness and an inability for many to effectively communicate with one another. When was the last time you heard a piece of “Breaking News” with a positive subject or outcome? Yeah, I don't remember either.

Now, more than ever, if we were to truly look around and listen, we would understand that this is the time to stand up for what is right and to look after one another. Deep

down, community and sense of belonging is what we all crave. Why must it take a violent catastrophe or natural disaster to remind us to stand united?

Malcom Gladwell, critically acclaimed author of *Outliers*, begins with an introduction titled “The Roseto Mystery”. The first chapter explores the story of a community in Pennsylvania that had roots in the town of Roseto, Italy before migrating to America. The newly formed community of PA Rosetans became somewhat of an anomaly because during that time in the 1950s when heart disease was an epidemic, people from Roseto, were essentially unaffected. After ruling out diet, exercise and genetics as possible causes for the rarity, doctors fascinated with the case concluded that it was due to the rich culture and the traditions that they brought with them from their Italian village that they were insulated from the pressures of the modern world. The Rosetans stopped to chat with each other in the streets, cooked meals together and lived with multiple generations under one roof. This social lifestyle had major benefits on their health. The doctors had to sway the medical community “to realize that they wouldn’t be able to understand why someone was healthy if all they did was think about an individual’s personal choices or actions in isolation. They had to look *beyond* the individual. They had to understand the culture he or she was a part of, and who their friends and families were, and what town their families came from. They had to appreciate the idea that the values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with have a profound effect on who we are.” [iv] Community, cooking and caring contributed to thousands of people living longer, better lives. Certainly, those three things could continue to help us thrive, if we allow them to.

Feeling that you are cared for, is a basic, essential human need. It is one that I get to deliver every night as a hospitality professional, engaging in thoughtful conversation and delivering mindful and timely service.

Perhaps one of the greatest restaurateurs of our time, Danny Meyer, says, “...Food is secondary to something that matters even more. In the end, what’s most meaningful is creating positive, uplifting outcomes for human experiences and human relationships. Business, like life, is all about how you make people feel. It’s that simple, and it’s that hard.” [v]

As a passionate and driven career server in fine dining, each night brings me new guests with endless possibility for life altering exchanges and a deliverable experience that could and often does make a lasting impact. With this great responsibility comes awesome reward, not just monetary, but something bigger and deeper than that. What’s infinitely better than an excellent gratuity, is the sense and assurance that you’ve made your mark on somebody’s life, while serving a meal. It’s the warm hug or tight handshake after the bill is signed, accompanied by a “you make a difference” or “your service is unlike anything we’ve ever experienced and made our night” that inspires me to leave my footprint on the world through the art of delivering genuine hospitality. I couldn’t agree with Meyer more when he said “I had begun to understand that business and life have a lot in common with a hug. The best way to get a good one was first to give one.”



2 hours ago

Party of 5 went here for dinner last night to celebrate my Grandfather's birthday. It was my first time at the restaurant, and a few others had been there before. Dana, our server, ensured that our experience was above and beyond our expectations! She was truly a pleasure to have as part of our time at Ocean Prime. You can really tell she has a passion for what she does, and that is clearly displayed in the experience she provides.

While being nice doesn't always equate with being successful, Danny Meyer certainly cares for others and succeeds in business. His philosophy of "enlightened hospitality", encompassing the idea that focusing on the welfare and happiness of your employees will in turn lead to well cared for and satisfied guests, is right on the money. Who doesn't want to feel like they are appreciated and cared for? We all do! It seems elementary to me. Treating others kindly is one of the first things we're taught!

Many of today's most successful companies share core values and philosophies which resonate on exceptional treatment of employees and awareness of customer needs. It should come as no surprise that a majority of them rate highest when it comes to customer service as well. In a letter to shareholders before going public in 1998, founder and CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos stressed a focus on "customer obsession rather than competitor obsession" as a core ingredient in success of Amazon.[\[vi\]](#)

At a time when so many news headlines pertain to the airline industry, it's refreshing to see that "The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and company spirit." Southwest is the only airline that has a mission statement posted prominently on their website and ranks higher in customer service ratings than any other.[\[vii\]](#)

The Ritz-Carlton famously exclaims "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen" and abides by their Three Steps of Service: A warm and sincere greeting, use of the guest's name along with anticipation and fulfillment of each guest's needs and a fond farewell.

With the above stated, the findings in the chart below should come as no surprise at all. We are living in a time in which entertainment and commerce options look drastically different than they have in the past. Particularly in the restaurant business, when hundreds of new operations open annually and a fraction of those survive to see year two, consumers and guests have a plethora of options. The stellar food may be served in an inviting and appealing environment, but if guests aren't made to feel like they are valued and cared for, there's no need to return.

WHY DO CUSTOMERS LEAVE A COMPANY?



[viii]

How blessed are we as hospitality professionals to work on and in a business which also works on ourselves? How lucky am I to have the opportunity each night to transcend class, cultural and geographical boundaries through the sanctity of dinner service?

The golden rule of treating others the way we wish to be treated is not foreign to many, nor is the idea that each day life should be lived as though it is our last, as tomorrow is never promised. I challenge you, however, to try and live by the words of the great philosopher Plato, (which are permanently etched on my forearm), “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Each night when guests are seated at my table, a chit informs me of their name, any celebrations occurring, party size, dietary restrictions or other pertinent information. What no technology could ever tell me is how long my guests have been saving their money for this special evening, what tragedies they’ve recently experienced, or how badly they need a listening ear and a warm meal.

Despite our countless differences, we humans share far more in common. In order to persevere through the challenges of the day to day, we must look after each other. Let us follow the examples of Abraham, the Rosetans and Meyer to do what is critical for all of our well-being, create community: albeit for one meal – and to make a meaningful impact on the beautiful world in which we live.



Dana L. Searle is a proud hospitality professional with a strong background in hotel/restaurant openings and food and beverage operations. She graduated from the School of Hospitality Administration at Boston University in 2010 and has since been involved in many facets of the business. Dana was part of the opening team at the Ames Hotel and has worked with notable companies including Walt Disney World, Coca-Cola Refreshments, Yelp and Cameron Mitchell Restaurants. She is extremely passionate about service and the impact that she is able to make on guests, strangers and colleagues daily through a warm smile and genuine altruism. She is currently based in Boston and would love to continue to inspire others through public speaking, staff trainings and creative writing.

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