

Boston Hospitality Review

www.bu.edu/bhr

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

The Pursuit of Hospitality Needs to Be Unreasonable

By Will Guidara,
Author of *Unreasonable Hospitality*

Experience Innovation - November 2023

About the Author



Will Guidara is the author of the national bestselling book, *Unreasonable Hospitality*, which chronicles the lessons in service and leadership he has learned over the course of his career in restaurants. He is also the founder of Thank You, a hospitality company that develops world-class destinations and helps leaders across industries transform their approach to customer service.

He is the former co-owner of Eleven Madison Park, which under his leadership received four stars from the New York Times, three Michelin stars and in 2017 was named number one on the list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants. Will serves as the host of the Welcome Conference, an annual hospitality

symposium, co-authored four cookbooks, was named Crain's New York Business 40 Under 40 and is the recipient of the Wall Street Journal Magazine's Innovator Award.

Connect on [LinkedIn](#)

The Pursuit of Hospitality Needs to Be Unreasonable



How do you define hospitality and the hospitality industry?

I believe, regardless of what you do for a living, you can make the choice to be in the hospitality industry simply by choosing to care as much about how you make people feel as you do the product or service you are providing. You can sell insurance or financial services. You could be a barber or pharmacist – and everything in between – and be in the hospitality industry. At the same time, I would argue that there are plenty of restaurants that are not. It's more a question of priorities than what you sell.

For most of our history, America had a manufacturing economy and now it's service-oriented – and dramatically so. Three-quarters of our GDP is driven by the service industry. We're in the business of serving other people. You become a part of the hospitality industry when you choose to look at how you serve them through the lens of hospitality and when you prioritize connection and engagement. It's about how you make people feel.

I think hospitality is when you give someone a sense of connection to you. It's about making people feel seen and giving them a sense of belonging. It's about making them feel welcome.

Why do you think hospitality, as you've defined it, doesn't necessarily permeate throughout the entire hospitality industry?

It comes down to what the leader of any organization decides is important. If a company culture is built on product throughput, service, and efficiency, but doesn't talk about the importance of connection or celebrate those who thrive on that, it's unlikely anyone who works there is going to focus on hospitality or care about it.

Hospitality doesn't happen in the absence of intention. It needs to be pursued by the people on the frontline. Often, that doesn't happen until leadership makes it matter and demonstrates hospitality themselves. I don't think it's possible to know how good it feels to give hospitality until you first know how good it feels to receive it. I also believe it's a non-negotiable part of the product or service.

I often use the metaphor that no car company ever debates whether the cost of the tires is a necessary part of the product. A car needs tires. Unfortunately, there are some people who don't think hospitality is essential. It's up to the people running the organization to decide whether it's a core value.

What would you say to a leader who is skeptical of hospitality as a business strategy?

No matter what product you sell or service you provide, there will eventually be someone who does it better. It will be of higher quality or lower cost. Businesses often talk about the need to build a moat, and that's often linked to a product or brand. I believe the biggest moat any business can create is by consistently investing in their relationship capital accounts.

Relationships take a long time to build and if they are built well, the loyalty that is a byproduct takes a long time to erode. LIV Golf and the PGA are a great example. The PGA was confident in its brand. They had the best product. It almost felt like their moat was endless. And then another group came along with more money. And because the PGA had not invested in their relationship capital accounts sufficiently, money was all it took for LIV Golf to take everything away from the PGA.

If you don't have meaningful relationships and haven't earned brand loyalty, someone else can come and take everything away from you. Remember, hospitality is being intentional in the pursuit of relationships. In the absence of hospitality, there is no genuineness to the relationship at all.

There's a famous economist who once said, in most businesses what gets measured gets managed. Another way of saying that is that if you can't clearly calculate the return on an investment, most businesses won't make it. Investing in hospitality is tough for

some because it can be hard to calculate the return. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. In fact, I believe it's so vast, it's almost incalculable.

What is “unreasonable hospitality?”

When you look across disciplines, no one who was extremely successful at anything did so by being reasonable. They became successful by being unreasonable in pursuit of whatever product they were putting into the world. You look at the best directors, designers, tech entrepreneurs, investors – they came by their success by being unreasonable and bringing the most fully realized version of their product to life. Their products are better than their competitors because they were willing to do whatever it took to make them the best. The same holds true with hospitality. My entire thesis is that making people feel seen is an important part of the exchange and that there's no reason not to pursue that as unreasonably as you are pursuing the product itself.

The word “unreasonable” becomes powerful when you put it next to the right word. Being unreasonable in pursuit of something virtuous is a beautiful thing. It's almost as if you're putting an exclamation point after whichever word follows it.

Why does unreasonable hospitality make sound business sense?

Unreasonable hospitality contributes to the long-term success of a business in several ways.

People don't collect things anymore. They collect experiences. Anyone who's providing service has an opportunity to give someone a memory, a story they can tell over and over to help them relive that experience. And the more people you have out there telling stories of the hospitality they received, the more other people want to interact with that business.

It's important to recognize that people at the top of many organizations have all the authority and none of the information. People on the front line have all the information and none of the authority. The concept of unreasonable hospitality is to create a meaningful exchange of authority and information and encourage people to imbue experiences with gestures of their hospitality.

Another challenge many businesses are struggling with is recruitment and retention. And everyone is using the same tactics – paying people a bit more, perhaps increasing benefits, trying to create more balance between work and life. Those are very important things to do. But they're treating the symptoms and not the underlying condition which is to give a sense of meaning to the work.

Unreasonable hospitality empowers your team. The people in restaurants who embrace this approach are no longer just serving plates of food someone else created. They're

infusing the experience with their own creativity. I have yet to meet a single individual who won't give more of themselves to help something succeed once they have a genuine hand in making that difference.

Unreasonable hospitality is a game changer when it comes to getting people to choose to work with you and want to continue working with you.

Is unreasonable hospitality scalable?

Unreasonable hospitality becomes scalable by defining what's required. And you don't even need to compel every single person to understand the power of hospitality. But if you design the customer experience and incorporate hospitality at every single touchpoint it can be transformative.

Think of a baby crying on an airplane. Flight attendants hand out free peanuts. That's because someone decided that it's a step of service and it's become systemized. If it was decided every time a baby started crying, the next automatic step of service would be to give out ear plugs to everyone sitting within proximity to the baby – well, that's a taste of unreasonable hospitality.

It means you're thinking through the perspective of those you're serving and trying to give them a bit more than they would expect because you care about them. And you're willing to work a little bit harder to make that happen. That doesn't require the person giving out the ear plugs to be hospitable. It just reflects that someone in the company decided it was non-negotiable and an investment worth making.

What do you think the biggest misconception is about the hospitality industry?

People need to appreciate that the hospitality industry extends beyond restaurants and hotels. In fact, anyone who engages people as part of their business has the chance to be part of the hospitality industry by demonstrating that they care and making sure customers feel seen.

I also think that too many people conflate service and hospitality as meaning the same thing. Service is part of the product. Hospitality is its own thing.

Service is what we do in the restaurant. Getting the right plate to the right person within the right amount of time. Table stakes. Hospitality is how you make that person feel when you serve them. Hospitality is establishing real connections between you and the people you're serving – and each other. In a restaurant with great hospitality, guests should feel a little bit closer to the people they dined with at the end of the meal than they did at the beginning.

Hospitality is just about being more human and approaching all the many choices you make with that sense of humanness in mind.