

30 Keys to Restaurant Success

There's no substitute for experience. You can learn a lot from restaurant owners and managers who have been in the business. These are the 30 most important, time tested keys to unlock the doors to your restaurant success. Important lessons learned by those who have managed restaurants in the real world. Use this guide as a skills roadmap to become a restaurant business champion.

30 Keys

1. Be Realistic
2. Be a Dreamer
3. Be Nimble, Be Quick
4. Know the Numbers
5. Know When to Ask for Help!
6. Be a Leader
7. Focus on guest experiences
8. Marketing
9. Teach your staff to SELL!
10. Create a culture
11. Do something unique
12. Don't be too unique
13. Find great staff
14. Train leaders
15. Put systems in place
16. Make sure no one is standing still
17. Don't overstaff
18. Don't under staff
19. Don't ignore trends
20. Don't follow trends
21. Run your kitchen like a machine
22. Communication
23. Show appreciation
24. Light the dining room appropriately
25. Manage noise levels
26. Negotiate everything! Get the best price
27. Don't try to appeal to everyone
28. Keep everything CLEAN
29. Use CRM
30. Let technology work for you

1. Be Realistic

Being realistic means staying grounded and facing things head-on. It's most important to be realistic about the things that are uncomfortable. Be realistic about your money, about interpersonal conflicts, about poor processes or less than excellent service. Constant improvement is the goal, so be realistic about what is going on in your restaurant and figure out what you can do about it.

Don't let difficulties discourage you. Always think of the possibilities and dream big. The road may be hard, but don't forget why you opened a restaurant. If your dream is one cozy bistro that feels like home or creating a restaurant empire with many locations, all running efficiently, never forget your restaurant dreams. Don't lose sight of your vision. Stay optimistic about the future.

In a restaurant, things can change on a dime. So you should be no stranger to rapidly adapting to evolving situations. If a supplier messed a shipment, if servers call in, if equipment goes down - these types of things should be expected as part of the business. Don't spend emotional energy on what's "unfair." It's better used finding a solution to move forward. Develop proper processes to minimize the impact of sub-optimal situations but be aware that something will always go wrong and it's up to you to make the best of it, in the moment.

4. Know the Numbers

Knowing the numbers that matter for your restaurant will give you a sense of control. You know what your operating costs are. You know how much food to buy for dinner service, and you know how many servers are needed for each shift, and what your table turn times are. You know how much good upselling adds to the average check. These and other numbers that run your business give you a way to measure what's going well and what needs improvement. Without a firm grasp of the numbers, you'd find yourself focusing either on things that don't matter or making poor choices.

5. Know When to Ask for Help!

You might be "good at everything," but it's impossible to be great at everything. As an independent and driven person sometimes it can be hard to ask for help from an expert. But when the time is right, you need to. Know when to get an accountant, someone to build your website, an interior designer or a management consultant. Know when to ask for help, even for simple things like asking a friend fill in a shift. A good leader knows how to delegate and issue directives. They do not insist on being an army of one.

6. Be a Leader

A leader gets out in front of problems, inspiring others through their conduct. Developing new leaders by understanding people's strengths and challenging their weaknesses. A leader inspires confidence in their brigade. Together, these things inspire loyalty. If you want to know that your staff is doing all they can to serve guests and is following proper procedures when you're not around, loyalty inspired by your leadership is how to achieve it.

7. Focus on guest experiences

The center of a restaurant should be the unique guest experience it provides. With guest experience as the crux, everything else in the restaurant comes into focus. Superior guest experiences aren't just a reason for diners to come back, stories of superior guest service go viral! Guests love to share with their friends when they have a great time out. Wouldn't you like your name to be at the end of the sentence, "I had an amazing time last night, you just have to make a reservation at my new favorite restaurant named...?"

Get the word out! It's vital to your success, especially in the beginning. Sorry to tell you, but it doesn't matter how amazing you think you are, if no one knows where to find your restaurant and why they should eat there, you'll fade into history without anyone ever knowing you existed. Effective marketing doesn't mean spending a lot of money. In fact, if you've properly identified your target customer, you should be able to think of some creative ways to get their attention by knowing what their interests are and where their ears and eyes are spending time. That's where your message needs to be!

9. Teach your staff to SELL!

Instead of just taking orders, your staff needs to see themselves as consultants to your guests. Sales should be regarded as making recommendations that enhance the guest experience, rather than "pushing add-ons". Don't assume a guest wants a well drink. Put the desert card in their hand and recommend a "favorite". Your guests will appreciate the tailored service, average check sales will go up, and your servers will make larger tips.

10. Create a culture

Identify what makes your restaurant special. How are things done and what are your standards? Create a culture among staff that reinforces the ideals of the restaurant brand. This is cultivated through detailed training, consistent policies and positive recognition.

11. Do something unique

Do you see something that's missing with other restaurants? A different way they could be run, new a guest experience or a local target market that is underserved? Finding your niche in the vast restaurant landscape requires doing something a little different than the rest of the places in your area. It's also a way to market. By associating your business strongly with something extraordinary, it becomes unforgettable!

12. Don't be too unique

While it's fun to be creative, remember that your primary business is to serve the needs and preferences of the locals. You want to have a substantial target group in the area to sustain your business, and that means appealing directly to their interests. Carefully balance your uniqueness against the tastes of your guests.

13. Find great staff

It's important that the people you bring in have a potential for greatness. Great staff are the ones who will embrace the culture you've created and "drink the kool aid." They have a strong work ethic, a sharp mind, the ability to deal with stress and are reliable. When interviewing, always ask questions designed to test the traits most important to your way of running things. Consider having multiple people interview candidates to get an alternate perspective. Always be hiring and looking for your next superstar because restaurant turnover is notoriously high!

14. Train leaders

For things to run smoothly, even when you're not there, you need good staff that you can trust to follow procedures and help train new employees. Identify the individual strengths and weaknesses in your staff members and encourage them to grow through challenges and responsibilities. Consider taking a leadership course for yourself and using the same techniques to train your staff.

15. Put systems in place

A place for everything, and everything in its place. A way to clean tables, a way to refill waters, a way to greet guests, a way to organize the walk-in. Everything needs to have a right way established that isn't just "good enough." It's your way, and it's an important part of the restaurant's unique brand and culture. With the fast pace and ever-changing dynamic of a restaurant, there need to be clear expectations for staff, and procedures taught through detailed training coaching and mentoring.

16. Make sure no one is standing still

There is WAY too much going on in a restaurant for someone to be scratching their ear looking for something to do. Everyone needs to know their top priorities and secondary tasks they can perform when they are waiting for something or otherwise unoccupied. Even worse than standing still is chatting and socializing! "If you can lean, you can clean" as the old saying goes. Give people clear procedures to follow so that they can't say "I don't know what to do."

17. Don't overstaff

Labor is by far one of the most expensive aspects of running a restaurant. Unproductive labor that you're paying for is like flushing money down the toilet. Don't be afraid to send someone home, especially if they're standing around or chatting and distracting other workers. If there is no valuable task that they can be performing in the whole restaurant, then they need to go home. It's just a matter of fact.

18. Don't under staff

This is one of the biggest challenges for restaurant managers. Although labor is expensive and you don't want to overstaff, for a restaurant properly run, there must be enough staff. Any position missing key players has the potential of creating a serious bottleneck that will shift pressure to other teams and even worse, to guests. Sometimes you can't help it when someone calls in at the last minute, that's why it's important to Always Be Training. By cross-training your staff, you have more options of who you can call in. Keep an emergency list of past employees and friends that you can call in clutch moments to fill in as well.

19. Don't ignore trends

If you do things the way you've always done, you're likely to get passed by. Tastes change, it's true. Depending on who your target market is, you'll need to adapt with the times. There are also innovations for how to manage front of house and back of house. Keep in touch with other restaurant owners and attend trade shows to see what is going on in the restaurant industry and decide if it's a passing fad or a true shift.

20. Don't follow trends

Remember that your restaurant's greatest asset is its unique guest experience. Any change in course should be met with grave contemplation and backed up with market research. Consider your brand and your target market. If a rising trend does not appeal to your guests, there is no point wasting your money!

21. Run your kitchen like a machine

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22. Communication

At every level of the organization, outstanding communication is one of the most important keys. A restaurant owner must communicate with investors, managers, staff, and suppliers to get the job done. Communication between front of house and back of house is vitally important.

Communication between team members during service must be substantive and brief, yet friendly. When designing processes for your restaurant, determine how staff should communicate with each other and how to encourage effective communication.

23. Show appreciation

When employees do a good job it's important, as a manager and a leader that recognize them. Realize that well-deserved recognition for a job well done is an important part of building a culture of excellence among your team. In the stressful environment of a restaurant, a little recognition can go a long way to boosting the spirits of your staff members. To encourage the positive behavior, you must reward it in some way. A smile, a thank you, a free meal, a gift card. Little things go a long way. They just want to know that their work does not go unnoticed.

24. Light the dining room appropriately

The importance of this might be overlooked. Lighting is one of the most significant parts of creating the mood you're looking to provide for guests. People don't want to eat in the dark nor a place with bright lights. Make sure you have appropriate sunshades indoors and out to keep the sun out of people's eyes as well. Consider your guest's comfort and provide appropriate lighting for their needs.

25. Manage noise levels

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27. Don't try to appeal to everyone

If you try to please everyone, no one will be happy. That's a lesson for life as well as designing a restaurant concept. If someone asks you who your target customer is, you should be able to identify the unique traits that define their lifestyle and how your restaurant has adapted to fit their needs. They should make up a large enough demographic in the surrounding area that they can sustain your business and have some unique needs that are not be addressed by other restaurants in the area. Another downside to trying to appeal to everyone is you'll have no vision in your marketing and you'll message to emotionally engage your customers.

28. Keep everything CLEAN

Keep everything in your restaurant clean. The dining area should be clean and tidy to provide guests a respite from the chaos and clutter of their daily life. How well maintained your front of house is will reflect directly on the customer's expectations of the quality of service and the food. Not only does cleanliness enhance guest experiences, but it's also an important safety aspect for staff. Especially in the kitchen. A clean kitchen runs better. Well maintained equipment lasts longer and protects your investment. Take pride in your establishment and cultivate a culture of cleanliness among your staff.

29. Use CRM

Keep in contact with your guests, collect their information to notify them of events and promotions. CRM stands for Customer Relationship Management, and it's a critical component of your restaurant marketing strategy. Start a loyalty program and know who your top guests are. Send a survey after they dine and find out what they think of service, or use it to find out more about them. Customer engagement can be facilitated by restaurant management software that helps you collect, store and track reservations and orders.

30. Let technology work for you

The restaurant industry is competitive and lucrative. That makes it a prime target for innovation. The last thing you want is to be throwing money away by doing things inefficiently. New kitchen equipment that gets things done faster, software to help you manage your staff and your customer database are just the start. There is amazing technology built into modern iPad POS systems for restaurants that can revolutionize your front of house while providing in-depth analytic data - the numbers that matter!