

Catering for deaf guests - are you doing enough?

Founder of terptree, a multi award-winning business with a mission to change the world for deaf people, Victoria Williams shares some tips on catering for deaf people and those with a hearing loss.

Deaf guests are as deserving of a great customer experience as anyone. But how many operators can, hand on their hearts, say that they're taking extra measures to provide one?

There are 11 million people with hearing loss across the UK. That's around one in six of us. Whenever I quote that figure to people, it always gets the same surprised response. The figure is growing, too. By 2035, Action on Hearing Loss estimates there'll be around 15.6 million people with hearing loss across the UK. That's one in five.

For lots of deaf guests, their disability is "invisible". If they don't choose to wear hearing aids, there is no visual identifier for waiting staff, who only discover the disability once there is a breakdown in communication...

The conditions are stacked against deaf guests from being able to communicate effectively in the hospitality environment, which is often noisy and busy. Exchanges tend to be quick and fast, leaving plenty of room for miscommunication and information to be missed. When this happens, the overall customer experience suffers, and deaf guests depart with a feeling of frustration.

However, catering for deaf guests is not as difficult as it might appear. Here are some of the ways you can begin to live up – or surpass, based on current levels of service – the expectations of deaf guests:

Maintain eye contact

Deaf people sometimes rely on lip reading when communicating. To allow this to happen, waiting staff need to maintain eye contact – or at least be faced in their direction. However, how many of us can say with any certainty that we maintain eye contact throughout an entire conversation?

When seating a customer, a server might turn their head and gesture in the direction of the table, talking as they do so. But during the time that they are facing away from the guest, all that information is lost. It's not the best way to start an interaction, with a view to creating a connection with the guest.

Confirm choices

When placing an order, deaf guests want some assurance that their choices have been heard correctly. No matter how nice the linguine is, if you had your heart set on lasagne, it's only going to end in disappointment.

So, waiting staff should always confirm they have interpreted their guest's choices correctly – not just audibly as you would ordinarily but visually, too, by pointing to the relevant item on the menu and seeking affirmation. Alternatively, Wagamama, for example, writes down guests' orders on the placemat in front of them, which provides the assurance in writing.

Avoid repetition

Things can get a little tricky once the conversation goes off-menu – for example, when a server is asking the guest if they want ice and lemon with their drink. If the guest is struggling to understand

what the server is asking them, one of the worst things that they can do is just simply restate what they just said.

We all get a bit embarrassed when we ask somebody to repeat themselves. Somewhat ironically, that feeling of embarrassment can make things even more difficult to understand what the person is saying second and third time round.

Instead, servers should be encouraged to use any visual aids that have available to them – their tablet, if they have one, would be a good place to start.

Learn the basics

Why not have staff learn the basics of Sign Language (British Sign Language (BSL) in the UK)? You don't see it very often, but there are few operators who are already doing this. For deaf customers, they then have the ability to communicate directly with staff. Imagine the impact it would have on deaf customers' experience and perceptions of you as an operator.

We are not suggesting that you need to become proficient in a new language – but the basics are always helpful to know. In doing so, staff will be learning to communicate in a more visual way, which could help with interaction with all guests, not just those who are deaf.

HGEM's Founding Director comments: "It's important to consider all guests when looking at your guest experience. Whether investing in training, giving your team more confidence in communicating with deaf guests or providing better access for physically disabled guests, the hospitality industry has an opportunity and a responsibility to provide inclusivity."

Final thoughts...

None of these measures are too difficult to achieve. There are other points I could've included, too, such as ensuring deaf customers are sat in a quieter, well-lit area which removes some of the adverse stimuli and makes it easier for guests to concentrate on their conversations.

Providing a better customer experience for deaf customers isn't just the right thing to do, it boosts customer loyalty. If your venue is one of the few in the area that has thought about improving the customer experience for deaf guests, you're providing one hell of an incentive to make repeat visits.