

Customer service in food and beverage: design for the moment

Turn a guest experience promise into consistent service during the busiest shift.

LE CHENE INSIGHT BRIEFING | Iain Ross Mackenzie

Observe the entire guest journey

Food and beverage service begins before an order and continues after payment. Find the places where the promise breaks: unclear reservations, missed dietary information, slow first contact, uneven pacing, payment friction and responses to a complaint. Observe actual shifts and ask guests and staff what happens when a table arrives late or the kitchen runs behind.

A journey map should include front and back of house. The guest experiences one service even when the work is split between hosts, servers, kitchen, managers and delivery partners. Identify the few handovers that repeatedly create delay or errors, and agree what the guest should be told while an issue is being resolved.

- Map the reservation-to-follow-up journey.
- Look at peak periods and exceptions, not only quiet services.
- Name an owner for each critical handover.

Give people standards and judgement

Standards matter because guests need a reliable baseline: accurate orders, safe handling, clear waiting times and respectful communication. Scripts cannot anticipate every situation. Teams also need decision rights to recover a service failure and escalate an issue appropriately. Research and teaching from Cornell's hospitality school emphasize the operational and human dimensions of restaurant service.

Practice with realistic scenarios: a delayed course, an allergy query, a disputed bill or a family whose needs differ. Measure what the team did and how the guest experienced it. Coaching after a service is often more useful than another generic lecture.

- Define standards for the moments that matter.
- Give staff clear recovery and escalation options.
- Use real scenarios for coaching and observation.

Measure the experience and the economics

Average ratings alone do not reveal which touchpoint failed. Review complaints by cause and time of day alongside wait times, order accuracy, returns and staffing levels. Balance guest outcomes with operational measures: a fast table turn that damages the experience is not an improvement.

A practical improvement cycle starts with one location or service period, tests a change and reviews both the guest response and staff workload. If the result holds, document the new process and support managers in coaching it across locations.

- Track repeat issues and service recovery, not just ratings.
- Test improvements against busy-shift conditions.

- Share lessons between operations, people and commercial teams.

A busy-shift service recovery example

Imagine a family is seated late, an allergy request is passed incorrectly and the kitchen is already under pressure. The standard operating procedure should establish the safety response immediately. A manager needs a clear escalation route, the kitchen needs an accurate reset of the order, and the guest needs a truthful timeframe rather than repeated vague apologies. The team should also know how to document the issue so the same failure can be prevented.

After the shift, map the chain of events without blaming an individual for a system failure. Did the reservation note reach the host? Was the allergy confirmation visible to the server and kitchen? Did staff have authority to pause service and check? Distinguish an isolated mistake from an unreliable handover. Then test the revised process at the next busy service and listen to staff feedback.

Recovery matters to the guest, but safety-critical failures must also be addressed at their source. A complimentary item does not fix a broken information flow.

- Protect safety and communicate a clear next step immediately.
- Investigate the handover after service, with the people involved.
- Test whether the new process works under peak load.

A practical measurement and coaching rhythm

Choose a small number of measures that correspond to the service promise: time to greeting, accuracy of orders, response to dietary needs, pace between courses, resolution of complaints and returning guests. Segment the results by location and shift. If one team struggles consistently, observe conditions before attributing the problem to training. Staffing, menu design, point-of-sale flow and management coverage may all play a part.

Managers can run a short pre-service briefing about one known friction point and a post-service review of what occurred. A weekly cross-functional review then decides which issue to fix, who owns it and how success will be checked. This keeps customer experience connected to workforce capability and operating economics. If a change improves ratings but increases unsafe rushing or staff turnover, it needs redesign.

- Days 1-30: observe key touchpoints and establish a baseline.
- Days 31-60: test one handover or recovery improvement.
- Days 61-90: coach, review and scale only what works.

What this means for clients

Le Chene can bring customer experience, operating design and people development together to improve service that guests can feel and teams can sustain.

Further reading

Cornell Nolan School, Faculty and Research

Cornell Center for Hospitality Research, service process research

lechene.net | enquiry@lechene.co