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Chef stabs man after complaint about service: Five lessons in customer service

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CARA WATERS

Police have charged a Sydney chef over the alleged stabbing of a man after he complained about the service at a restaurant in the city's south west.

The NSW police reports that five men were at a restaurant on Haldon Street in Lakemba late Sunday night when they complained about the service.

An argument ensued at the front counter of the restaurant and a chef allegedly retrieved a long metal skewer from the kitchen and began threatening the men with it.

The fight continued outside the restaurant after the customers walked away and the chef returned inside.

Police allege the chef came back outside armed with the skewer and attempted to strike one of the men with it.

The skewer pierced the palm of the customer and exited the other side. He had to be taken to Sydney Hand and Eye Hospital for surgery.

A 43-year-old chef from the restaurant was charged with reckless wounding and placed under arrest today.

Jo Ucakalo, the chief executive of Handle My Complaint, which **assists businesses to avoid and resolve complaints**, told *SmartCompany* that, obviously, stabbing a customer in response to a complaint was not the way to go.

"Business owners and staff need to remember that everybody has the right to complain, but the person making the complaint does not have the right to be abusive, offensive or violent," she says.

"If you do feel that somebody is overstepping the boundary in terms of being too emotional you need to have some strategies in place."

Ucakalo has the following tips for businesses in handling customer complaints.

1. Train your staff to deal with customer complaints

Ucakalo says customer-facing staff will be more likely to recognise or receive a complaint before the business owner will.

"So it is important that you train your staff to be on the lookout for signs of dissatisfaction, it is best if you don't wait until somebody is obviously unsatisfied," she says.

Ucakalo recommends training staff to look at the faces of the people sitting at the tables in a restaurant and checking whether they look satisfied, content or frustrated.

For businesses working in a virtual space where they don't have direct contact with customers, she recommends giving customers a call and asking how they think service is going.

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"Asking questions gives a chance to get feedback and feedback can effectively stamp out complaints. You will never know the problems with your business if you don't ask," she says.

2. Try to defuse the situation through active listening

Ucukalo recommends being really conscious of your tone and how you address the person making the complaint.

"Defuse the situation by being calm, clear, allowing them to speak and using non aggressive tones and language," she says.

"You need to practice active listening. If you are face to face, maintain eye contact, nod and have an open body stance. Another key way is to echo back some of the things they are saying."

3. Empower staff to deal with complaints

According to Ucukalo the best way to deal with a complaint is to empower your staff.

"Try to resolve the situation before it escalates," she says.

"What that might mean to a business is giving staff a value that they can automatically assign as a goodwill gesture. In a restaurant it might be a dessert or wine or in another business it might be some sort of product or discount."

Complaints should be handled quickly so customers know they are valued customers and that you are a professional business.

To go over and above the assigned value, Ucukalo recommends staff are required to seek management approval.

4. Acknowledge the complaint

Ucukalo says customers want to be acknowledged and heard when they complain.

"So you have to be conscious of allowing the person to vent or rant or to email," she says.

"Acknowledging their emotion or complaint doesn't mean accepting responsibility, it just means telling that person that you appreciate the situation they are in."

She recommends acknowledging the complaint but then quickly coming up with a result and outcome.

"That means asking the person 'What do you want to make you happy?' or 'How can we switch this situation into a positive one for you'. Just have a few key phrases about moving them into the resolution."

5. Make something happen from the complaint

Finally, Ucukalo says you need to make something happen.

If staff are authorised to resolve the complaint it should happen quickly, and if they have to escalate to management, then try to do it quickly.

"If there is a shortcoming in your business, admit you have made a mistake and tell the person who has

complained the outcomes you have applied to your business," she says.

"Perhaps even consider thanking them for the complaint. If they are a highly valued customer or important then consider an apology gesture like a bottle of wine or something that will mean something to them."


Ucukalo recommends recording the details of the complaint so you can spot trends as to whether something is reoccurring or is a one-off.

"Make refinements to your business and find those opportunities to improve your business. The best way to do that is making the changes to your business that your customers want," she says.

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