

Damage Control

Because things often go awry, Anderson and Associates offers advice on making things right.

Q. I have a dedicated and skilled set of professionals working in my spa. We are extremely busy, especially on the weekends, and sometimes everything seems to go wrong. Clients run late, machinery malfunctions, reservations are not updated, people call in sick, manufacturers don't deliver on time, and more. What should we do when a wrench is thrown into our plans and things don't turn out exactly as expected?

—Dreading the Unexpected

A. Dear Dreading the Unexpected: Mistakes are a possibility in every profession. Unfortunately, even the best trained spa staffs can't prevent the occasional error, be it an aromatherapy massage with the wrong scent or a double-booked appointment slot. In a service-oriented industry, errors are inevitable. Be that as it may, the dissatisfied customer most certainly is not. While we cannot prevent all problems, we can learn from our mistakes. Addressing an error quickly and completely at the time it occurs can transform a frustrated customer into a loyal patron. Service recovery is a way to say, "We are terribly sorry for our mistake and are willing to do our best to make it up to you."

First and foremost, always be vigilant in the delivery of your service. Check, recheck, and then triple check that all systems are in place to avoid errors. This starts with accurate record keeping, ongoing training, and a high level of morale and ownership by your staff. Errors should be the exception and not the rule. Service recovery often entails discounts and freebies, which can erode your bottom line and your reputation.

When rectifying a significant error, remember that timing is everything. React immediately. If you give guests time to stew over a problem, they will inevitably become increasingly distressed and more

difficult to appease. A quick response time shows them you care. For this reason, it's important to empower your employees by giving them the ability to make managerial decisions. The level of empowerment you give them should be directly proportional to their skill level and your trust in their judgment. The scope of their empowerment (i.e., what decisions they can actually make for the client) should, of course, be based on the severity of the error. Once again, this is a judgment call they should be experienced enough to make. Your staff's ability to respond quickly shows grace under pressure and underscores your commitment to customer service.

Service recovery can appear to cost quite a bit up front. However, when you add up the amount spent to develop a loyal client relationship and subtract the revenue lost when they (and their friends) leave, your up front recovery costs begin to fall into perspective. Not responding to issues immediately can result in costly legal involvements and related administrative charges. Finding creative and innovative ways to address service recovery not only helps keep your guests happy, but it also provides an excellent training tool for your staff members. They get an opportunity to learn about various service pitfalls as well as ways to avoid them. They're also better poised to solve problems when they arise. Expecting the unexpected helps prepare your employees for the unknown, keeps clients happy, and saves you money in the end.—**Peter C. Anderson and Michele A. Chandler**

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