

When A Guest Complains

When guest complains, listen to your staff too

BY NATE-TRA DHEVABANCHACHAI

What can I do when guests use their feet to point at things when I serve them? Can I tell the guest that I hate this?

Recently, I was invited by the Office of Tourism Development of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports to train rank-and-file employees in four provinces in Thailand. Two out of the four provinces are in the southern part of Thailand.

Most of the staff members representing the southern hotels receive a great number of foreign guests; the other two hotels are in the eastern provinces and cater more to Asians. The attendees work in establishments ranging from two-to five-star resorts and unique boutique resorts.

This time, the target plan was for training rank-and-file employees from housekeeping and bell service sections. However, other employees at management level and from other departments were welcomed.

During the training, I faced some questions from participants which I would like to share here.

Some questions are quite innocent and, with common-sense developing and with more experience, the questioners will soon excel in their duties. However, some questions and some situations show that the staff members do face hardship many times. Senior managers and owners need to understand these issues and listen to their staff more.

Some information and answers given to employees might be correct today, but may be not tomorrow as the hospitality industry grows more sophisticated.

The development of common sense at all staff levels among hoteliers, a sound and clear policy, as well as a systematic operation and training must go hand in hand.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. What can I do if the guest does not want to pay for what they took from the mini-bar? Obviously, the guests cheat but they insist on not paying. If I cannot collect from them, I have to pay the hotel myself. Many times I have to quarrel with guests, which I don't want to do, but I have to. This causes lots of frustration for everybody. When the guests say they are unhappy with the service, they never mention that it is from their cheating.
2. I know that I have to serve ladies first. However, when both guests are clearly gay, who should I serve first?
3. If the guest says to me that she hates sunshine, she looks at me and clearly she expects some kind of answer from me. How can I respond to this issue so as to give her satisfaction?
4. If I go up to the guest's room for room service, but the guests are engaged in a romantic moment, what should I do? Should I leave the food there and go away, or should I say something? I don't wish to disturb their activity, but I don't know what to do, as I am already in the room.
5. How can I communicate in English when I damage a guest's belongings, and I feel very sorry and I wish to take full responsibility for it and even pay for it? (Author's note: See, how responsible some staff are? I often receive this kind of question during trainings.)
6. When guests confirm that they left valuable items in the room, but we don't have any proof of this, what can I do when my manager does not want to face the guest and senior hotel managers are not in? What I should do, I don't speak good English?
7. When I enter a guest room to clean it, and a couple quarreling acrimoniously know that I am in the room, what should I do? Should I say something at all, or should I leave quietly? What is the best way to deal with this situation?
8. When I am cleaning a guest room, the door is open and a guest enters the room, how do I speak to the guest in English to say that I want to verify that this room truly belongs to this guest? It is a policy that I must ask for the





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key card and check this with the door of the room. This policy always upsets the guest, who complains that our service is bad. Every day, I do the right thing according to what I am told to do, but it seems I do nothing right for the guests.

9. What can I do if I greet a guest nicely, but the guest does not even look at me or does not give a damn about my greeting? Should I continue greeting them?
10. What can I do if the guest does not speak English? How can I serve them well when we don't understand each other?
11. What can I do when guests use their feet to point at things when I serve them? Can I tell the guest that I hate this? (Author's note: Pointing at anything with your foot is a very offensive gesture in Thailand.)
12. How can I politely inform our guest that it is contrary to our policy for staff to go outside the hotel to buy condoms for them? Every time I say this, the guest gets very upset. The management (or owner) does not want to sell condoms in the hotel as he says this reflects badly on the hotel's image. But we (the staff) are the ones who face the guests, not the management and owners, I wish the management (or owner) will understand their real target market better. They build and operate a cheap, worn-out hotel and expect a good image without condoms. Isn't this a bit contradictory?

As mentioned, many things can be solved by common sense and many of them can be solved by hotel policy. If you have an existing policy, turn it into a system and train your staff to clearly communicate these policies.

Some of my answers are short, but some are long, as we need to make it clear from the foundation until the solution. One important thing: as most of them are at operational level and could not communicate well in English, I can only suggest them that they must remember this important single sentence and practice it 10 times a day: "I am sorry, my English is not quite good enough; I will call my manager for you right way."

Employees should not try to argue with guests in broken English, it only makes the situation worse.

I hope that senior managers who read this will have a little more respect and tolerance for their staff as they have to face – many times – more than just simple service as foreseen by managers and owners. This is even more important, particularly when employees cannot react or always give a correct answer to something that seems to be very simple to the manager or owners.

Managers and owners, please remember this: explaining hotel policy to guests may not be that easy for your staff due to different levels of language proficiency, authority and experience. Therefore, a policy must be made, a system must be established and what cannot be lacking is SIMPLY a lot of "training."

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