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the **royal** treatment

Whether you're at the mall, the salon or the coffee shop, here are 18 insider tips to make sure you get preferred customer service. By Fiona Wagner

We all have that friend who knows how to get great customer service. Take reader Denise Woods, for example. She often gets bumped up to first class, upgraded to better hotel rooms and squeezed in for after-hours emergency hair fixes. Her secret? Donning a huge smile, having open body language, calling people by name and just being polite. "I think it gets you a lot further than being demanding," she says. To check out her advice - and get more insider secrets - we asked bank managers, hairstylists, bartenders and travel consultants how to convince them to go the extra mile for you. So, here's our five-step plan - with 18 top-notch tips - for getting stellar service and scoring some perks along the way. ▷



STEP 1 Mind your manners

Walk in their shoes Long hotel lineups may be your pet peeve, but they're no excuse to lose your cool. Next time you're at the front of the queue, try saying to the front-desk agent, "This line looks long, but it's moving very fast." The person behind the desk is probably just as frustrated as you are - so that friendly boost might help her check you in and get you your room sooner.

Give them the eye You're at a bar, it's busy and you're thirsty. Should you join the other patrons who are competing to get the bartender's attention? No way. "The person who is polite, quiet and waiting her turn with money in her hand is the one I'm going to serve first," says Mike Hibbits, senior bartender at My Apartment in Toronto.

Ask their name At the Daily Grind Café in Halifax, staffers say they'll make special drinks or sandwiches and even have birthday parties for the regulars who take the time to get to know them. The same holds true for Clare Smyth, a veteran server at Inn on the Twenty in Jordan, Ont. "Nothing is

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more rewarding for me than to have people remember my name," she says. Treat her like a valued person and she might treat you to dessert.

Say please Asking for help rather than demanding it will always win you points. "I'm always taken aback when customers say, 'Are you busy?' before they ask a question," says Ann-Marie Power, a concierge at the Marriott Hotel in Toronto. It makes her feel as if customers understand the demands of her job. And don't forget: she's the one who can get you last-minute dinner reservations, so it pays to make friends with her.

STEP 2 Do your homework

Hit the books When booking a March break getaway, give more thought to your destination than "someplace hot" or you'll be sending your travel agent on a fishing-for-details trip. Read the paper, surf the Web and take all your research with you when you meet with her. "The more information clients share, the better the ability of the travel agent to get deals," says Dianne

Wright, sales and marketing manager for Flight Centre Canada East.

Pull out the plastic When you're buying concert tickets, have your credit card number and expiry date on hand, says Patti Babin, national director of promotions and publicity for Ticketmaster Canada. The time it takes you to dig through your purse or check your calendar could make or break the ticket agent's chance of getting you front-row-centre seats.

Make a note When planning a home reno project, have all the information, including measurements, in a portable file. If you're purchasing a door, what size do you need? If you're looking for paint, which room is it for? "Our suggestions are dictated by your circumstances," says Murray Smith, a former manager at The Home Depot.

Take a picture When it's time to update your do, know what you want and don't want. Most stylists appreciate it when you show them a picture of the type of cut you're after. "It's hard when clients don't know what they want but they expect you to figure it out for them," says Johnny Cupello, owner of JC Salons in Toronto. So, start flipping through magazines several days before your appointment and you won't end up hiding under a hat for weeks.

STEP 3 Build a relationship

Go live Online transactions have some advantages, but sometimes they're at the expense of long-term service. Ginette LeBlanc, a Carlson Wagonlit travel consultant in Winnipeg, says it's wise to use a live agent because, if disaster strikes, you have someone to help you get home. "I will help the people who booked here," she says, "but why should I help someone who booked online instead?"

Spread the word There are three things a new client can say to John Steinberg, owner of John Steinberg and Associates salon in Toronto, that'll make him give more than his usual knock-your-smock-off service: I'm returning to the workforce, I just lost a lot of weight or I was referred by a friend. "It's an opening for discussion that shows the client is ready for something new," he says.

Think small Loyalty is a big deal to the small retailer. Give her your regular business and reap the rewards. "It's not a set system that if you spend this much you'll get a deal," says Kim Steed of Steed Cycles in northern Vancouver. "But if you keep coming back, you'll start getting discounts." >



Speak up In restaurants, be clear with your server about your expectations. It's as easy as saying, "We have tickets to the theatre so we need to be on our way by 7:15." Or, "We're really looking forward to an intimate and relaxing supper." Build a rapport with your server and she can adjust the timing of the meal to meet your needs.

STEP 4 Time it right

Know your store Be strategic and try to do some of your shopping during a retail downtime. "If you come here at 3 p.m., you can have your makeup done, ask questions and take your time," says Ginette Cyr, manager of a M.A.C Cosmetics store in Toronto. You can still have these services at noon, of course, but the makeup artist may not have much time to devote to you alone.

Beat the clock Show up on time or a few minutes early at the hair salon. "If you're late and you put the hairdresser behind, she may rush the haircut or you might not get offered a coffee," says Cupello. "Being on time gives us the opportunity to get it right."

Stay on their good side When it comes to appointments or reservations, don't phone half an hour before and cancel unless it's an

emergency. No-shows are a no go and you may be relegated to your manicurist's, stylist's or mechanic's blacklist.

STEP 5 Complain the right way

Don't blow your top Voice your displeasure, articulate your position and be logical, making it easier for the person you're dealing with to respond professionally. "Customers I respect are patient with us in our efforts to resolve errors," says Bank of Montreal branch manager Michael Sprague.

Do it now Don't wait until you're home to complain. "If the bruschetta was cold and you didn't like it, don't wait until after you've eaten to let me fix it," says Mahalia Majdoub, a server at Panorama lounge in Toronto. "I'll take it off your bill, get you a new one or get you something else."

Take a memo If you feel uncomfortable confronting someone in person or if you're too upset to be rational, take a moment the next day to write a letter or send an e-mail to the manager. When she is aware of the problem, she'll likely go out of her way to compensate you for your bad experience. She'll make amends with a sincere apology or maybe drinks or dinner on the house. **C**

tips on tipping

Now that you've completed your crash course in getting great service, how can you make sure you're giving appropriate rewards? Check out these at-a-glance guidelines for savvy tipping practices.

AT A RESTAURANT

Server 15 per cent for average service; up to 25 per cent for exemplary service

Sommelier or wine steward 15 per cent of the cost of the bottle

Buffet server Five to 10 per cent, depending on the amount of service provided

Quick tip for you If you are considering *not* leaving a tip, ask yourself what part of the experience you're unhappy with. Don't shortchange the server if your meal wasn't cooked properly. If you're unhappy with your server but the food was delicious, consider leaving a partial tip with the manager for the kitchen staff.



AT A SALON

Stylist 15 to 20 per cent of the cost of the service

Assistant \$2 to \$5 or more, depending on the service provided
Owner Same as stylist. Note that some accept tips, while others don't.

Quick tip for you Are you a regular customer or would you like to be one? If you get your hair styled by the same person each month, you might want to tip on the generous side.

AT A HOTEL

Bellman or doorman \$1 to \$2 per bag

Concierge \$1 to \$2 for simple requests, such as dinner reservations; \$5 to \$10 for tougher assignments, such as last-minute theatre tickets

Housekeeper \$1 to \$3 per person, paid each day

Quick tip for you Recognize how much the person helped you. If the bellman carries your bags from the front desk to your room, tip the minimum. If he brings your bags inside, shows you how to work the TV and fills your ice bucket, add more.

AT A BAR

Bartender \$1 to \$2 per round, or 15 per cent of the total tab

Server \$1 to \$2 per drink

Coatroom attendant \$1 per coat

Quick tip for you Consider the complexity of your order. Flipping the cap off a beer bottle doesn't require the same effort as mixing a tray of pina colodas. Reward accordingly.