

2021: The year when the customer is not always right

The Indian hospitality business is currently going through what I would call an existential crisis. It's never been easy to run and operate a restaurant, and even hotel chain behemoths have been facing stiff competition from the boutique players at more attractive price points, that have been cropping up all over the country over the last few years. However, none of these competitive challenges could have prepared the industry for what Covid-19 wrought.

An insightful report by Jones Lang LaSalle noted that 53% of the total leading hotel operators in India had to shut down more than 80% of their inventory during the nation-wide lockdown period, with the majority anticipating a period of 13-24 months – at the very least – for their portfolios to return to 2019 RevPAR levels. And the National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) predicted that India's US\$50 billion restaurant industry would lose an ~US\$9 billion in 2020.

Considering this shockingly bleak outlook for the Indian hospitality industry, and the pivots and changes it will have to make during this long journey back to recovery, I often catch myself thinking about the impact this has had on customers. How are they dealing with their favourite hospitality brands suffering and are they providing support and loyalty to their go-to spots during this extremely trying time? Unfortunately, the answer is not a resounding 'yes.'

Customer entitlement, especially in a country like India, has always been at an all-time high. Atithi Devo Bhava – the belief that guests are equivalent to God – is a mantra that has been drummed into our heads and nowhere is this taken more seriously than in the Indian hospitality industry. While this attitude has resulted in our hotels especially, and some of our leading restaurants being touted as some of the finest service providers in the world, there is also a dark underbelly to this approach.

Allowing customers to run amok when it comes to what they think they can get away with at restaurants and hotels is dangerous, as it breeds a bloated sense of privilege. We've heard of enough examples in the past – and may even be guilty of doing this ourselves – to know that it's often easy as pie to get away with ridiculous requests when dining out or traveling. Demands for heavy discounts and freebies on meals and stays are commonplace in the hospitality and restaurant world. The subservience of Indian hotel employees helps create an inflated sense of self, thereby leading to a very imbalanced relationship between a customer and members of the hospitality industry, with no healthy boundaries. I firmly believe that hospitality schools and institutes, especially those tied to older, more traditional hotel groups, should begin eliminating this sense of subservience, and instead teach students how to politely say NO.

Now, more than ever, we need to understand that the industry that feeds us, entertains us and gives us their luxury rooms to sleep in, needs our support. As customers, we should be acutely aware of the significant damage that the pandemic has wrought on the hospitality industry, and think of ways in which we can help it limp back to normalcy. If they put new policies in place, we should adhere to them, understanding that this is being done most probably as a reaction to ever-changing Government guidelines. Don't cancel reservations if you can help it. Focus less on limited seating and smaller menus and more on the experience of being able to dine out again. Graciously recommend restaurants and hotels to your networks if you've had a good experience. And for god's sake, wear your masks, sanitize your hands and don't complain about the way restaurants and hotels have spaced out tables and seating – it's all being done for a good reason. Let us all strive to be well mannered guests, receive services graciously and not overstay our welcome by making unsustainable demands on food and beverage establishments. Together, the hospitality sector and we as its gallant guests can surely emerge from the crippling year that has been, stronger and in better health, and I have a feeling our hospitality industry will thank us for it.

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