

# Building Genuine Relationships Face-to- Face and online

by Jennifer A. Smith



In the restaurant world, the smallest interactions can make or break a customer's experience. Once, at a Japanese restaurant my husband and I frequent, I ordered something I hadn't tried before: black cod. While I'm usually a savvy diner, I didn't realize that black cod, also called butterfish, was utterly unlike the Atlantic cod I've enjoyed at many a fish fry (duh!).

While my meal was well-prepared, the flavors and textures just weren't for me. Though I didn't complain, our server saw me stealing bites of my husband's sushi and, completely unbidden, said she'd be happy to let me order something else—no extra charge.

While that restaurant swallowed the cost of a black cod entrée that night, it cemented my loyalty as a customer.

By noticing my disappointment and proactively offering a solution (generously, and without making me feel foolish), the server demonstrated that she cared about my enjoyment of the experience. We've been back many times since. That's a restaurant with a view of the bottom line that stretches beyond a night's receipts.

That example also goes to show that what might be a negative experience

for a customer can easily be turned into a positive with a little effort and staff who are motivated and empowered to connect with customers.

And in today's world—when customers can instantly share their thoughts with friends and the public at large—connecting with customers personally and keeping them happy is a necessary ingredient for success. A great experience or a dismal one can be posted in minutes on Facebook, Twitter, or a customer review site like Yelp or Urban Spoon. As Danny Meyer of New York's legendary Union Square Café once told *The New York Times*, "A great restaurant doesn't distinguish itself by how few mistakes it makes, but by how well they handle those mistakes."

Now more than ever, smart restaurant operators are seizing opportunities to make positive connections with customers, both face-to-face and online.

## One-on-one hospitality leads to brand ambassadors

Mark Phillips, innkeeper and public relations manager at the Old Rittenhouse Inn located in Bayfield, often deals with customers who have particularly high expectations: people

on vacation. With Americans' shrinking vacation days, when we do have time to get away, we want it to be spectacular.

Located just blocks from Lake Superior, the Old Rittenhouse Inn is an acclaimed Victorian-style bed and breakfast that also operates a fine dining establishment, the Landmark Restaurant.

Phillips' parents, Jerry and Mary, founded the business. Following the example they set, Phillips strives to connect with customers the moment they contact the Inn. He and his staff thoroughly answer the questions of potential guests and diners and act as guides to the community. "We want to act as that 'Google page' for Bayfield," says Phillips, who runs the business with his wife, Wendy.

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– Danny Meyer

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Clearly, the Rittenhouse's efforts to connect personally with customers and leave a favorable impression are working. Phillips describes one guest who makes an anonymous gift each year so that someone in the community can attend the Rittenhouse's Wassail concert free of charge.

Phillips describes the generous man as "someone who made an emotional connection here many years ago" due to visits to the Rittenhouse with a family member who has since passed away. When picking the Wassail ticket recipient, "We try to pick people who are deserving or have had a tough year."

The guest who anonymously treats another patron also responds enthusiastically to the Rittenhouse's Facebook posts, frequently sharing the posts with his own list of friends. "He's what I would call a brand ambassador. He's out there promoting our brand, and that's just invaluable."

What Phillips describes is a good example of what marketing gurus dub "customer evangelists"—people who are so connected with your brand or establishment that they take the lead in promoting it. Nowadays, when many people are turning to friends rather than restaurant critics to decide where to dine, these evangelists play a critical role in your marketing strategy.

### A two-way street

Other restaurant operators are using Facebook to attract new customers and keep the lines of communication open with existing customers, fostering a personal bond and creating loyalty. Becky

Berger, founder and owner along with her husband Scott, of Yo Mama! Frozen Yogurt in Wauwatosa uses Facebook for several reasons.

Berger uses the social-networking site to spread the word about the yogurt flavor of the week, run contests, and ask customers about their favorite flavors and toppings. Says Berger, whose business is expanding rapidly, "We're good about getting back to people pretty much immediately. We've gotten a lot of input from our customers by using Facebook."

Berger also uses Twitter (tweeting under the handle "yomamagoodness," which has over 850 followers). While she posts on Facebook generally just once a day, her tweets are more frequent. "Twitter is more of an ongoing dialogue with customers," she says.

The original Yo Mama! location opened in June 2011; a second store will open in Brookfield in April 2012 and, after that, a third location in Shorewood. Part of the reason for the business' rapid success has been its ability to forge connections with customers—especially parents.

The store has been a hit with families with young children and even holds a "Story Time with Mama" event for preschoolers every other week. After being read a story, children do a related craft project. Then, they make their own yogurt creation from the self-serve bar. Many parents and kids have become Story Time regulars and Berger's manager knows them by name.

The event provides parents a fun outing with their children and also encourages repeat business and a sense of Yo Mama! as a family-friendly community gathering place.

Berger recalls a time in which a mom posted on Yo Mama!'s Facebook page that her daughter was having her tonsils removed and was hoping that her favorite yogurt flavor, cookies and cream, would be available that week. Berger made a special effort to get the flavor and pack pints of it; both mom and daughter were thrilled—and, one imagines, told their friends about the special touch Yo Mama! delivered.

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– Alex Galt





important third element: the physical space itself.

“One of the things we realized was crucial was a good counter for people to sit at. That’s been very important for allowing a personal connection between staff and customers. People are very comfortable speaking over

a counter... it’s almost like a doctor/patient relationship,” he laughs.

The long counter running nearly the length of the coffeehouse offers a comfortable space for customers to chat with staff about food, cooking or even personal topics, creating a homey vibe.

### Physical space, real connections

In Green Bay, Alex Galt, who owns two adjacent businesses with his wife, Linda—Kavarna Coffeehouse and Parisi’s Delicatessen—says making personal connections involves face-to-face interactions, social media and an

### Creating a Culture Where Connections Happen

So as a restaurant operator, how do you foster this type of vibe? You can’t force chemistry or tell your staff they need to be best friends with all of their customers. But you can cultivate a culture where these types of magical spontaneous connections between employees and customers are likely to happen.

A simple way to do this is to recognize the positive connections that employees are already making and point these out as good examples in front of their peers. As an owner or manager, you can also be a good example yourself when you are interacting with customers to set the bar for how customers should be treated. Most importantly, employees need to feel empowered to make this happen.

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Social media has replaced Kavarna's monthly e-mail newsletter. "We got positive comments and it grew a lot over the two years we did it," says Galt of the newsletter, "but the difference with Facebook is that it's a lot more two-way, with back-and-forth interaction. It's been incredibly important." The Galts can quickly share information not only about food and beverage offerings, but music, farmers' markets, a crafters' market, lectures and other in-store events.

"We're up to almost 3,400 fans on Facebook, which is pretty sizable for our market," notes Galt. While he doesn't tweet directly, Galt has set things up so his Facebook posts also show up on Twitter (@kavarna).

### Happy employees will spread the word

While your employees are invaluable ambassadors when they are on the clock, they can also be your ambassadors online.

Talking to staff at the Wisconsin Restaurant Association, I found out that many employees identify so positively with the place that they work, that they frequently say great things about the restaurant to their friends on Facebook, Twitter and the like. Some even routinely post on Facebook when they will be working and urge their friends and acquaintances to stop by and see them. The positive power of having employees who feel personally invested in the place they work has increased dramatically in this age of social media.

### Know your customer—and keep listening

At the Madison Club, executive chef and assistant general manager Dan Fox also finds face-to-face interactions and a well-thought-out use of social media to be a winning combination in developing personal connections with customers. As an upscale, membership-based club, "Our business model is making that personal connection with customers," says Fox.



**"If we haven't seen a member in a long time, we send them something or call them to encourage them to come back in."**

something fun," he says. For a couple who got married at the club, Fox planned a special two-year anniversary party at which the menu echoed that of the wedding day.

The Madison Club also takes note of who hasn't been in lately. "If we haven't seen a member in a long time, we send them something or call them to encourage them to come back in."

Community involvement can also

be a way for restaurants to connect with customers on a personal level. Tomaso's, a family-owned restaurant in Cedarburg that specializes in pizza, gives out scholarships to local high schoolers and has also made a sizable donation to the local volunteer fire department. Says co-owner Nicole Schemenauer, "We're a small community, and so we know a lot of the families coming in."

In the end, the best strategy for restaurant owners these days seems to be combining

– Dan Fox

the time-tested (good old-fashioned customer service) with the new (social media) to connect with customers. Keeping the lines of communication open and engaging with customers directly makes for a happy—and profitable—business.

As Mark Phillips of the Old Rittenhouse concludes, "You can learn so much just by listening." **WR**

The Madison Club takes its social media strategy seriously, using an outside consultant to make recommendations about content to post via Facebook or Twitter. Maintaining a stream of fresh content is the biggest goal. Posted items include food pictures, contests, photos of people enjoying themselves in the club and even cooking videos.

The club's face-to-face strategy entails knowing customers' preferences and special events in their lives. "If their child's sixteenth birthday is coming up, we'll put together a special dessert or

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