

BY JAMES FISHER

Invisibility

THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY defines invisible as “impossible to see, not visible, not accessible to view, hidden.” Many of us probably feel as though we are invisible at certain times. Goodness knows Claude Rains had to be as the star in the 1933 classic movie based on H. G. Wells’ novel “The Invisible Man.”

It is with the idea of “The Invisible Man” that I began a little experiment approximately two years ago. Now, it must be stated that such an experiment is not scientific in any way. It is a mere attempt to find out what happens to the lone traveler where service is key in terms of delivering a satisfying experience.

Let me set the guidelines. My career requires that I am out of town approximately 40 to 45 weeks annually; therefore, I have many meals alone. I began to realize how frustrated I would become at being ignored or overlooked when I would go to a full-service restaurant for dinner (supper for those in the Northeast). Assume on average that if I am out of town for four days, I would have a minimum of two sit-down dinners most of them alone. I was always fascinated by my perception that when dining alone, especially mature males, you are invisible to the majority of the staff. By invisible I mean that from the time the hostess greets and seats you, numerous staff members will pass the table and not acknowledge your presence in any way.

My not-so-scientific approach consists of one basic action: if I’m not acknowledged within two minutes from the time of being seated, then I simply get up and leave the restaurant. I am not so rigid that “by acknowledged” I mean it must be by my appointed server who must be there within that “window” to take a drink order, order, etc. Acknowledged simply means (for the purpose of this exercise) that some member of the staff actually approaches the table, stops and performs some verbal or other action.

Given the number of travel weeks as stated with the number of dinners per week, that is approximately 160 table-for-one experiences. Whereas I actually do not know the exact number—hence, not a scientific study—I do know the number of times that I have actually left a restaurant based upon the “two minute drill” is 43. The most recent being right before I sat down to write this column.

What is extremely interesting about the action of leaving a restaurant within that two minute window for that many times is that only three times has anyone at the hostess station ever said something to me upon my departure. When asked if there is anything wrong, I merely state, “Not at all, it appears this is simply one of those nights when I am invisible to all around me.”

Probably many of you reading this have had similar experiences. There have been several scientific studies done recently regarding the “mindful expansion of time when service is not forthcoming.” In other words, whatever the actual real wait time might be, multiply that exponentially, and that is how it is viewed in the mind of the individual being affected.

All of this has been based upon the restaurant segment of the retail industry, but this can be transferred to our industry as well. My career puts me in more than 25 (on average) convenience stores per week throughout the country. It is with the highest degree of disappointment that I write about my “two minute drill” regarding our industry; my entry, two minutes spent inside and exit are not acknowledged by over 70 percent of locations visited. Just how are we building great customer experiences if the simple act of recognition and appreciation for stopping and spending time with us cannot be accomplished?

Our goal must always be to become a totally embedded part of our customers’ lives. To achieve that we must be constantly vigilant as to how they are perceived and reacted to by every level of our organization. If we are to be a life partner, then we must also be service friends. **NFPI**



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