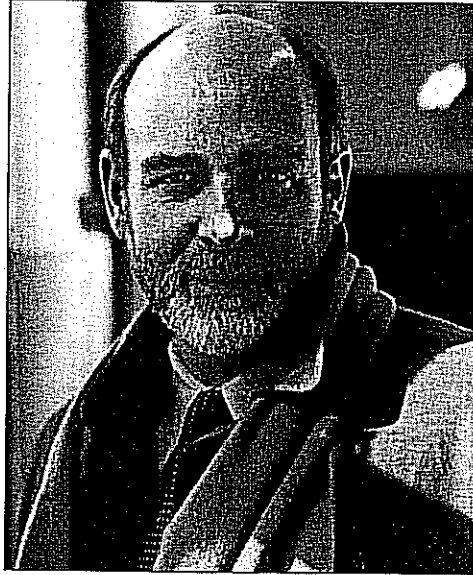


Turning the Tables

Author explains his idea of customer service



Paco Underhill

Retail anthropologist Paco Underhill has unlocked the secrets of consumer behavior in his two books, "Why We Buy" and "The Call of the Mall." A former restaurateur, Underhill grew up in the diplomatic corps in Southeast Asia, where the mix of the basic and the exotic informed his childhood. Today, through his New York-based company, Envirosell, he helps retailers worldwide understand what makes their customers tick.

When you think of restaurant service, what words come to mind?

Service in a restaurant is about fulfilling the expectation of the customer relative to the price and ambience in the restaurant.

Do you usually leave a set percentage tip, or does it vary?

I do not leave a set percentage. Having owned a restaurant years ago, I am generous to a fault or correct to a fault, based on the circumstances.

What is your pet service peeve when you dine out?

Loud music or noise is enough to drive me out the door. If I have to struggle to hear or talk, I am miserable. Small typefaces on the menu also bug me.

What makes you happiest when you dine out?

A dinner out is a social occasion. I like being able to talk to whomever I am dining with.

Do you ask to speak with a manager when there is a service issue?

I will ask for a manager if I have to, but only after I've given the waiter and or host a chance to sort out the problem.

How many times will you try a restaurant if you had bad service the first time?

We exist on the wings of choice. Fail me once, and you'll never get my business again. Solve my problem, and you'll earn my respect.

Who are your service role models?

Mr. Kim, our house manager in Seoul, could produce a sit-down dinner for 50 people with 24 hours' notice. He was completely dignified and controlled. I learned more about grace from him than anyone else in my life.

Do you believe service is a trainable skill or an inherent quality?

I am conscious as I move from one side of the Atlantic to the other that service is trainable; however, the character that underlies that service is more inherent. As an American, I'd say my service radar also rates friendliness and personal warmth. I'd rather stay at a Swiss guesthouse where the help is warm than a five-star hotel where the service is icy and professional.

— Amy Spector