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Techniques for Increasing Server's Tips: How Generalizable Are They?

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Abstract

In a 1996 *CQ* article, Lynn introduced the idea that restaurant managers could increase their servers' tips, and thereby reduce turnover, by training the servers to engage in one or more of seven tip enhancing behaviors. Since then, the list of tip enhancing behaviors has expanded and a manual was produced to help managers train their servers in the use of these techniques. However, empirical support for the effectiveness of these behaviors rests on only a few studies that typically involve only one or two servers at a single restaurant. More research is needed to see if these small scale demonstrations generalize to a larger, more heterogeneous sample of servers and restaurants. This study addresses that need with an internet survey of over a thousand restaurant servers from across the United States. Results indicate that servers who engage in the behaviors more frequently report larger tips relative those of co-workers. These findings support the effectiveness of the behaviors at increasing tips for a variety of different servers working at many different restaurants. Thus, restaurant managers are encouraged to train their servers to engage in these behaviors.

Keywords

restaurant management, human resources, tipping

Disciplines

Food and Beverage Management

Comments

Techniques for Increasing Servers' Tips

How Generalizable Are They?

by MICHAEL LYNN and MICHAEL McCALL

In a 1996 article in *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Michael Lynn introduced the idea that restaurant managers could increase their servers' tips, and thereby reduce turnover, by training the servers to engage in one or more of seven tip-enhancing behaviors. Since then, the list of tip-enhancing behaviors has expanded, and a manual was produced to help managers train their servers in the use of these techniques. However, empirical support for the effectiveness of these behaviors rests on only a few studies that typically involve only one or two servers at a single restaurant. This study involves an internet survey of 1,066 restaurant servers from across the United States. Results indicate that servers who more frequently engage in the tip-enhancing behaviors report larger tips relative to those of coworkers. These findings support the effectiveness of the behaviors at increasing tips for a variety of different servers working at many different restaurants. Thus, restaurant managers are encouraged to train their servers to engage in these behaviors.

Keywords: restaurant management; human resources; tipping

Employee retention is a major concern in the restaurant industry. According to a leading restaurant news publication, *People Report*, the average turnover rate among hourly restaurant employees was greater than 107 percent in 2006, based on data collected from one hundred companies

that operate more than eleven thousand restaurants with overall sales exceeding $42 billion. Put into perspective, at this rate, this particular group of companies will likely need to replace more than seven hundred thousand employees and nearly fifteen thousand managers at a cost that exceeds $1.8 billion (Berta 2006). Coauthor Michael Lynn (1996, 2003, 2005) has argued that one way restaurant managers can reduce turnover among their wait staff is by increasing their servers' tip incomes. This suggestion is consistent with academic hospitality research supporting the important role of compensation in employee motivation and retention (e.g., Boles, Ross, and Johnson 1995; Lynn 2002; Simons and Enz 1995). It is also consistent with studies finding that servers who earn larger tip percentages think about quitting less than those who earn smaller tip percentages, and restaurants with larger average tip percentages report lower turnover rates than those with smaller average tips, especially among restaurants with lower sales (Lynn 2002, 2003).

Research conducted by coauthor Lynn (1996, 2003, 2004, 2006) has suggested that managers can increase their servers' tips by training the servers to take some or all of fourteen different actions (listed in the accompanying sidebar). These server tactics are thought to increase tips for a variety of reasons. For example, giving guests after-dinner candies is thought to make customers feel obligated to return the favor (Strohmetz et al. 2002). Smiling, drawing pictures, entertaining guests, and forecasting good weather are believed to elevate guests' moods (e.g., Rind and Strohmetz 2001). Finally, introducing yourself by name, touching customers, squatting next to the table, and thanking guests should increase the server's rapport with guests (Lynn 2006). Studies testing the effects of these actions have found that

Research has shown that taking some or all of the following actions generally increases servers' tips.

1. Wear something unusual
2. Introduce yourself by name
3. Sell, sell, sell
4. Squat next to the table
5. Touch your customers
6. Entertain your customers
7. Repeat customers' orders
8. Call your customers by name
9. Draw on the check
10. Use credit card insignia on tip trays and check folders
11. Smile
12. Write "thank you" on the check
13. Forecast good weather
14. Give customers candy

they increase tips around 20 percent on average, with some actions increasing tips by 40 percent or more (see Lynn 2003, 2006).

Although the effectiveness of the tip-enhancing techniques has been supported by research, those studies have focused primarily on small samples of one or two servers who were usually employed at a single restaurant. Consequently, it is not clear how well the results from these small-scale demonstrations generalize to a larger population of servers working at diverse restaurants. In particular, as Lynn (2004) acknowledges, many of the behaviors advocated seem inappropriate for upscale restaurants and may not increase tips at those types of establishments. In addition, there is reason for believing that the effectiveness of these tip-enhancing techniques may be limited in other ways as well. For example, Rind and Bordia (1996) reported that drawing smiley faces on the backs of checks increased the tips received by waitresses but not those received by waiters, while

Leodoro and Lynn (2007) reported that squatting down next to the table increased tips from white patrons but decreased tips from black patrons. The study described here was designed to address this issue of generalizability by testing the effectiveness of the techniques among a broader sample of servers and restaurants.

Data Source

Current and former restaurant servers completed an online survey about their experiences on and opinions of their job. Participants were recruited by sending invitations to students, as well as to members of commercial consumer lists (DataCorp) and panels (Zoomerang) who indicated that they were servers, and to people on Facebook.com and Myspace.com whose profiles indicated they were servers. We also asked for recruitment help from industry managers, websites that attract servers (e.g., waiterrant.net), and survey respondents. For this study, observations were excluded from analysis if the respondent was not from the United States ($n = 295$) or had not waited tables within the past year ($n = 580$), leaving 1,606 observations for analysis. Due to missing values for some variables, however, sample sizes vary for some analyses.[1]

Survey Questions

Participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they engage in a series of behavioral activities when serving their customers. Each of these behavioral items was derived from prior empirical research and has been summarized in several academic and managerial hospitality publications (Lynn 2003, 2004, 2005). Specifically, respondents were asked how frequently—(1) *never*, (2) *sometimes*, (3) *often*, (4) *all the time*—they engaged in the following thirteen activities, most of which are drawn from the fourteen activities listed in the sidebar:

1. Wore or carried something unusual (e.g., button, pen, or piece of "flair")
2. Introduced yourself by name to your customers
3. Tried suggestive selling
4. Squatted next to the table or sat at the table when interacting with customers
5. Touched your customers
6. Told your customers stories or jokes
7. Repeated customers' orders back to them when they were ordering
8. Called your customers by their names
9. Drew pictures on your customers' checks
10. Gave your customers big, open-mouthed smiles
11. Wrote "thank you" on the backs of your customers' checks
12. Told your customers that the weather forecast for the next day is favorable or good
13. Complimented your customers on their food choices

In addition, respondents were asked to indicate how their tips compared to those earned by coworkers at the restaurant using a 7-point scale (1 = *much larger than most others' tips*, 4 = *about the same as most others' tips*, and 7 = *much smaller than most others' tips*). This variable was reverse-coded so that higher values reflect larger tips. Finally, the survey asked a series of questions about respondent demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, race, age, and number of years' experience as a

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1. Some of the data from this survey have been previously used by Kwortnik, Lynn, and Ross (forthcoming), but the relationships examined in that study were completely different from those reported here. In other words, all the findings reported here are new.

server), employer characteristics (i.e., restaurant name, average per-person bill size, and geographic location), and other issues not examined in this article.[2]

Results and Discussion

Sample Characteristics

The respondents to this survey ranged in age from 16 to 66 years, with a mean age of 28 years. Ninety-two percent were white, 70 percent were female, 74 percent were currently employed as servers, and 26 percent had been employed as servers within the past year. They came from every state and were well distributed among U.S. Census regions, as follows: West, 18 percent; Midwest, 25 percent; Northeast, 23 percent; and South, 34 percent. Their experience waiting tables ranged from less than 1 year to 50 years, with a mean of 7.5 years. The servers worked at a variety of independent and chain restaurants, with a wide range of check averages (from under $5 to over $100, with a mean of $27.48). To prevent outlying values from biasing the results, we recoded ten values of per-person bill size under $5 and four values over $100 as missing values. We considered these extreme observations to be questionable.

Frequency of Service Behaviors

As summarized in Exhibit 1, few servers regularly engaged in the thirteen tip-enhancing service behaviors that we tested. That is, a majority of servers never or only sometimes engage in the following actions: drawing pictures on the check, touching customers, forecasting good weather, wearing flair, squatting next to the table, calling customers by name, writing "thank you" on the check, and telling jokes or stories. Only suggestive selling is practiced frequently by 70 percent or more of the servers. Thus, managers do have an opportunity to increase these behaviors among their wait staff.

Regression analyses predicting each behavior from server status (current or past), years' experience as a server, restaurant's average per-person bill size, server age, server sex, server race (white or other), and region of the country (dummy coded: West, South, or Midwest, with Northeast as the implicit comparison) indicated that the frequency of the behaviors varied across all these predictors (see Exhibit 2). Several results are worth noting. First, more experienced servers are less likely than others to smile and write "thank you" or draw on the check but are more likely than others to call the customer by name, upsell, tell jokes or stories to customers, and squat next to the table. These results may reflect servers' learning over time that some tactics are more reliable or effective than others, so it will be interesting to see whether they correspond to the relative size of the tactics' correlations with tips in this study. Second, servers at more expensive or upscale restaurants were more likely than others to call the customer by name but were less likely than others to introduce themselves by name, write "thank you" on the check, wear flair, squat next to the table, and draw on the check. These results are consistent with Lynn's 2004 acknowledgment that

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2. We also asked servers to report their average tip percentages. We found that this variable was much less reliably related to the tip-enhancing behaviors than was the comparative tip measure. However, average tips was arguably a less sensitive measure than comparative tips, because average tips did not control for differences in average tip across restaurants, as comparative tips did. Therefore, only the results involving the comparative tip dependent variable are reported below.

Exhibit 1:

Frequency of Tip-Enhancing Behaviors among the Sample of Servers Surveyed

Behavior	n	Mean	(1) Never (%)	(2) Sometimes (%)	(3) Often (%)	(4) All the Time (%)
Draw pictures on check	1,596	1.45	72.9	15.1	6.2	5.8
Touch customers	1,593	1.68	50.0	36.8	8.9	4.4
Forecast good weather	1,596	1.69	49.3	34.8	13.2	2.8
Wear flair	1,596	1.72	58.0	22.6	8.9	10.5
Squat next to table	1,598	1.87	47.4	28.7	13.5	10.4
Call customer by name	1,597	2.23	22.0	42.4	25.7	9.8
Write "thank you" on checks	1,592	2.28	39.8	20.1	12.6	27.4
Tell jokes or stories	1,591	2.45	8.4	49.3	31.5	10.8
Complement customers' choices	1,583	2.70	6.6	33.3	44.0	16.1
Repeat customers' orders	1,595	2.89	5.6	30.1	33.5	30.8
Smile	1,592	2.97	7.0	23.4	34.9	34.7
Introduce self	1,598	3.01	17.0	18.0	12.2	52.8
Suggestive selling	1,588	3.09	5.7	21.8	30.7	41.8

many of the tactics are less appropriate for more upscale restaurants, so it would be worthwhile to test the role of restaurant expensiveness as a moderator of these behaviors' effects on tips. Finally, waitresses are less likely than waiters to introduce themselves by name but are more likely than waiters to touch customers, smile, write "thank you" on the check, wear flair, and draw on the check. These sex differences might reflect differential customer response to the behaviors depending on whether they come from waiters or waitresses; thus, it would be worthwhile to test the role of sex as a moderator of these behaviors effects on tips. Given the significant effects of all these variables on one or more of the server behaviors, they were all used as covariates in subsequent tests of the relationships between those behaviors and tips.

Effects of Service Behaviors on Tips

Partial correlations between the frequencies with which servers engage in each of the behaviors and their tip sizes compared to those of coworkers are presented in Exhibit 3. The partial correlations controlled for server experience, sex, age, race, and status as a current or former server as well as restaurant price and geographic location. Although the correlations are modest in size, all of the behaviors were reliably associated with larger tips. To see whether any of the behaviors predicted unique variance in comparative tip size, we included them in a regression model along with the covariates previously described (see Exhibit 4). In that analysis, only calling customers by name, $B = .11$, $t(1379) = 3.09$, $p < .005$; upselling, $B = .11$, $t(1379) = 3.35$, $p < .005$; smiling, $B = .09$, $t(1379) = 2.66$, $p < .01$; telling jokes or stories, $B = .14$, $t(1379) = 3.52$, $p < .001$; and squatting next to the table, $B = .09$, $t(1379) = 2.79$, $p < .01$, produced reliable and positive effects. Interestingly, the four behaviors engaged in more often by experienced servers (i.e., call the customer by name, upsell, tell jokes or stories to customers, and squat next to the table) were

Exhibit 2:

Regression Analyses Predicting the Frequency of Various Server Behaviors

	Introduce Self	Customer Name	Upselling	Touch Customers	Repeat Order	Smile	Tell Jokes or Stories	Write Thanks on Check	Complement Customers' Choices	Wear Flair	Squat Next to Table	Draw on the Check	Predict Good Weather
Intercept	3.77***	1.33***	2.50***	0.66***	2.53***	2.14***	2.24***	1.54***	1.96***	1.20***	2.02***	1.12***	1.16***
West (yes = 1, no = 0)	-.25*	.19**	.03	.18**	.02	-.002	.13	-.15	.03	.11	.19*	-.03	-.24***
South (yes = 1, no = 0)	.27**	.11	.26***	.12*	.12	-.10	.09	-.13	.03	.14	.32***	-.08	-.28***
Midwest (yes = 1, no = 0)	.23**	.18**	.23**	.06	.07	-.06	.03	.04	.03	.05	.12	-.09	-.10
Average per-person bill	-.004*	.004**	.002	.001	.000	-.002	.000	-.01***	.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	.000
Current server (yes = 1, no = 0)	-.09	.09	.14*	.18***	-.04	.05	.07	-.15*	.16**	-.03	-.03	-.07	.06
Years' experience	-.01	.02***	.01*	.01	-.01	-.01**	.01**	-.02**	-.001	.004	.01*	-.01*	.003
Server age	-.02***	.02***	.002	.01***	.01***	.01*	-.003	.004	.004	.004	-.02***	.002	.01***
Server sex (male = 1, female = 2)	-.14*	-.06	-.04	.13**	.05	.46***	-.05	.58***	.04	.25***	.02	.35***	.07
White server (yes = 1, no = 0)	.07	.13	.24**	.11	-.09	-.02	.19*	.17	.32***	.05	.25**	-.02	.14
R²	.06	.12	.04	.08	.02	.06	.02	.09	.03	.03	.06	.07	.06

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Exhibit 3:
Partial Correlations between Server Behaviors and Reported Tip Size as Compared to That of Coworkers

	Partial-r	n	p-*Value* <
Tell jokes or stories	.22	1,481	.001
Squat next to table	.18	1,481	.001
Call customer by name	.18	1,481	.001
Touch customer	.16	1,481	.001
Upsell	.15	1,481	.001
Smile	.15	1,481	.001
Complement customers	.14	1,481	.001
Predict good weather	.11	1,481	.001
Write "thank you" on checks	.09	1,481	.001
Draw on checks	.08	1,481	.01
Wear flair	.07	1,481	.01
Introduce self	.05	1,481	.05
Repeat order	.05	1,481	.05

Note: These partial correlations control for server experience, sex, age, race, and status as a current or former server as well as restaurant price and geographic location.

Exhibit 4:
Regression Analysis Predicting Comparative Tips

	B	t*(1379)*	p-*Value* <	*Partial*-r
Intercept	3.62	14.06	.001	
West (yes = 1, no = 0)	−.05	−0.61	n.s.	−.02
South (yes = 1, no = 0)	−.06	−0.84	n.s.	−.02
Midwest (yes = 1, no = 0)	.03	0.40	n.s.	.01
Average per-person bill	.002	1.08	n.s.	.03
Current server (yes = 1, no = 0)	.16	2.61	.01	.07
Years' experience	.02	3.88	.001	.10
Server age	−.01	−2.78	.007	−.08
Server sex	−.18	−2.92	.004	−.08
White server (yes = 1, no = 0)	.04	.41	n.s.	.01
Introduce self	−.05	−2.07	.04	−.06
Call customer by name	.11	3.09	.003	.08
Upsell	.11	3.34	.002	.09
Touch customer	.04	0.94	n.s.	.03
Repeat order	−.04	−1.13	n.s.	−.03
Smile	.09	2.66	.009	.07
Tell jokes	.14	3.52	.001	.10
Write "thank you"	.02	0.89	n.s.	.02
Complement customer	.04	1.05	n.s.	.03
Wear flair	.02	0.58	n.s.	.02
Squat next to table	.09	2.79	.006	.08
Draw on check	−.04	−1.05	n.s.	−.03
Predict good weather	.03	0.82	n.s.	.02

among the top five strongest predictors of tips and were among the five predictors explaining unique variance in comparative tips. Thus, it appears that servers do learn what works over time and increasingly use those tactics. The exception to this observation is smiling, which has a relatively large effect on comparative tips and accounts for unique variance in tips, but which experienced servers are less likely to do. Based on this finding, we suggest that restaurant managers should remind their experienced servers to smile more often.

We take particular note about the practice of introducing oneself by name, which is a common script in many casual dining restaurants. This action had a significant negative effect on tips in the simultaneous regression analysis controlling for all the other behaviors, $B = -.05$, $t(1379) = -2.07$, $p < .05$. We can only speculate, but perhaps customers find such self-introductions annoying (or they realize that they are listening to a script). This negative effect on tips may have been suppressed or hidden in the earlier analyses by the possibility that servers who do introduce themselves also take a number of actions that are associated with larger tips, such as smiling and touching customers. This is an interesting issue for future research.

To assess the generalizability of these findings, we first constructed an index of how frequently servers engaged in all the behaviors by averaging the separate behavioral measures. This index has a coefficient alpha of .76 and was significantly positively related to comparative tips in a regression analysis controlling for all the covariates previously described, partial-r = .24, $B = .50$, $t(1451) = 9.58$, $p < .001$. The product of this variable with each of the covariates or control variables was then entered into the regression model (see Exhibit 5). Only status as a current server rather than a former server moderated the

relationship between the behavior index and comparative tips, partial-$r = -.08$, $B = -.37$, $t(1442) = -3.04$, $p < .003$. This interaction indicated that the relationship was stronger for former servers, partial-$r = .34$, $B = .74$, $t(375) = 6.89$, $p < .001$; than for current servers, partial-$r = .21$, $B = .41$, $t(1067) = 6.90$, $p < .001$, but was clearly significant for both groups. None of the other interaction terms was significant, indicating that the effects of the behaviors taken collectively are not moderated by the control variables in this study.

Second, we conducted separate regression analyses to determine whether average check per-person moderated the effects of certain behaviors at upscale restaurants (i.e., calling customer by name, introducing oneself, writing "thank you" on the check, drawing on the check, wearing flair, and squatting next to the table). Each of these behaviors was entered into a separate regression analysis along with the usual covariates, and the product of the behavior and per-person bill size. None of the interactions terms was significant in these analyses (see Exhibit 6), but some of these actions were quite rare in restaurants with per-person bill size greater than $45. The data contained just thirty-two instances of "often" or "always" wearing flair, twenty-nine of squatting next to the table, and only nine of drawing on the check at such restaurants, meaning that there may not have been enough power to detect expected interactions of these variables with restaurant expensiveness. Future research should address this problem by experimentally manipulating these server behaviors at both expensive and inexpensive restaurants to determine whether restaurant expensiveness moderates their effectiveness. Our data do suggest, however, that the tactics are effective at restaurants of all price levels where they are frequently tried.

Exhibit 5:

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Comparative Tips

	B	t	p-*Value* <	*Partial*-r
Step 1 (*df* = 1,451)				
Intercept	4.06	19.00	.001	
West (yes = 1, no = 0)	.000	0.004	n.s.	.000
South (yes = 1, no = 0)	−.05	−0.69	n.s.	−.02
Midwest (yes = 1, no = 0)	.01	0.18	n.s.	.01
Average per-person bill	.002	1.57	n.s.	.04
Current server (yes = 1, no = 0)	−.13	−2.24	.03	−.06
Years' experience	.03	5.15	.001	.13
Server age	−.01	−3.11	.003	−.08
Server sex	−.19	−3.32	.002	−.09
White server (yes = 1, no = 0)	.08	0.81	n.s.	.02
Behavior index	.50	9.58	.001	.24
Step 2 (*df* = 1,442)				
Behavior Index × West	.09	0.21	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index × South	−.59	−1.59	n.s.	−.04
Behavior Index × Midwest	.30	0.76	n.s.	.02
Behavior Index × Bill	.001	0.14	n.s.	.004
Behavior Index × Current	.80	2.55	.02	.07
Behavior Index × Years	.004	0.40	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index × Age	.003	0.34	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index × Sex	.05	0.45	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index × Race	−.25	−1.32	n.s.	−.04

Exhibit 6:

Results for Interaction Terms in Twelve Separate Regression Analyses Predicting Comparative Tips

	df	B	t	p-*Value* <	*Partial*-r
Bill × Introduce Self	1,451	.000	−0.78	n.s.	−.02
Bill × Customer Name	1,449	.001	0.51	n.s.	.01
Bill × Write "Thank You"	1,446	.000	−0.78	n.s.	−.02
Bill × Wear Flair	1,448	.000	−0.54	n.s.	−.01
Bill × Squat Next to Table	1,450	.002	1.14	n.s.	.03
Bill × Draw on Check	1,448	.000	−0.31	n.s.	−.01
Sex × Introduce Self	1,451	−.04	−0.88	n.s.	−.02
Sex × Touch Customers	1,445	.08	1.09	n.s.	.03
Sex × Smile	1,446	−.03	−0.50	n.s.	−.01
Sex × Write "Thank You"	1,446	−.01	−0.20	n.s.	−.01
Sex × Wear Flair	1,448	.02	0.24	n.s.	.01
Sex × Draw on Check	1,448	−.02	−0.23	n.s.	−.01

Finally, separate regression analyses were run to determine whether server sex moderated the effects of certain behaviors by servers (i.e., introducing oneself, touching customers, smiling, writing "thank you" on the check, drawing on the check, and wearing flair). None of the interactions terms in the separate regressions was significant in these analyses (see Exhibit 6), suggesting that the tactics are effective for both waiters and waitresses and that sex differences in the tendency to use the tactics are due to other causes. Identifying those other causes is one potentially interesting direction for future research.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that, among a large heterogeneous sample of servers from across the country, average tip sizes relative to those of coworkers were larger for those servers who more frequently used the tip enhancing behaviors identified and advocated by Lynn (1996, 2003, 2004, 2005). While these correlational findings do not prove that engaging in the behaviors increased servers' average tips, experimental evidence that the behaviors causally increase tips already exists (see Lynn 1996, 2003). Parsimony suggests that the same causal processes underlie the relationships in this study too. These findings do indicate that those effects are not limited to the small samples of servers and restaurants used in previous experimental research. The nonsignificant interactions in this study could be type 2 errors due to insensitive measures with a large error component, and other moderators not examined here may exist, so further research on the generalizability of these tip-enhancing techniques is needed. Nevertheless, these behaviors appear to increase tips among a large heterogeneous sample of servers working at a large number of different restaurants from across the country.

The results of the study also indicate that one-third or more of servers engage in the tip-enhancing behaviors only occasionally, if at all. Combined with the findings on the effectiveness of the behaviors, this suggests that restaurant managers have an opportunity to increase their servers' tip incomes by training them to engage in these behaviors. Both common sense and prior research (Lynn 2002, 2003) indicate that doing so will help to reduce turnover. This is not a panacea for the turnover problem plaguing the industry, but it does promise to help and costs little. We invite managers to download a training manual titled "Mega Tips" free of charge from the Cornell Center for Hospitality research website (chr.cornell. edu) and to train their servers to engage in these tip-enhancing behaviors.

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