

Hotel breakfast: Asset or downfall?

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Breakfast is frequently one of the last things your guests experience before they check out, so it is likely to leave a lasting impression. Even if we've got the quality of food and the menu balance right, how much effort goes into getting the service spot on?

If you run a bed and breakfast, chances are what you serve and the way you serve breakfast probably garners a lot of your attention as it's often the only meal you provide. But do hotels give breakfast the same focus?

For many hotels, breakfast provides a great opportunity for additional profit. But we'll never capitalise on this if we don't look after our existing breakfast customers.

You probably serve more breakfast than any other meal, but does it receive the same degree of care and attention as lunch or dinner?

All too often breakfast is used as a training ground for new or inexperienced front of house staff. I frequently experience waiting staff at breakfast who have little more than a basic understanding of what's available, the basics of hygiene when clearing and setting up tables, and dare I say it, of the English language.

How welcoming are your guests made to feel at breakfast? Do they get a surly request for their room number, with absolutely no eye contact as the waiter or host checks their list? Or do they get a nice genuine smile and a welcoming "Good morning"?

Breakfast service can be confusing for those not familiar with your hotel. Simply telling a guest it's self-service (which is what I heard the other day at breakfast) doesn't really tell us very much, especially when the guest is still standing at the front entryway and can't even see into the restaurant or where the buffet is located. Should they wait to be allocated a table, or can they just sit anywhere they like? Will you be serving fruit juice, tea and toast, or do they go and help themselves? If you have just one type of egg on the buffet, are others being cooked to order?

A smooth and speedy operation is paramount on busy weekdays when everyone appears to descend on the restaurant at once. The necessity for speed of service may differ at weekends from midweek. Few business users during the week are prepared to hang around waiting for their pot of tea and toast, whilst those on a leisure break are more likely to take their time and not feel rushed. Recognising guests' expectations and being able to adapt to their approach and style of service will be an important factor in how your guests perceive the level of service.

One of the most frustrating things with breakfast buffets or self-help items is the complete lack of logic in the layout. Just a little thought applied to the order in which guests would want to collect their items can avoid bottle necks and prevent frustrated guests who may not be at their best first thing in the morning.

Here are 10 tips for avoiding bottlenecks (and mess and wastage):

1. Encourage your team to take the **customer journey**, serving their own breakfast and seeing everything the guest sees. Some things to check:
2. **Fruit Juice:** Are the glasses next to the fruit juice? Are all the various juices labelled so guests can work out what they are without having to taste them? It's not only frustrating

for the guest to discover that what looked like grapefruit juice is in fact pineapple, but does nothing for your wastage levels and food costs either.

3. **Cereal:** Are your bowls, cereals and milk arranged logically for guests to pick up the bowl, help themselves to cereal, then pour their milk? It sounds obvious, but I so often see guests having to backtrack to get their milk.

4. **Milk:** Recognise that pouring milk needs two hands—one to hold a cereal bowl, another to pour the milk. Is there anywhere to place fruit juice, tea or anything else guests already have picked up?

5. **Pastries:** The logical flow goes for toast, breads and pastries, butter/ spreads and preserves. The guests' sequence is plate first, bread second, then spread followed by jam. It frustrates them to find they've sat down and forgotten their butter.

6. **Tea:** If guests make their own tea, is it easy to make? Where I stayed this week all the pots were already laid up with teabags, which is fine if you wanted normal tea, but there were no other pots for brewing specialist teas. Guests had to empty teabags out of the pots to make their tea. Crazy! ... and nowhere to leave the wrappers.

7. **Hot drinks:** Depending on what you use for hot water or coffee, check how well this dispenses. Is it pre-measured? If so, does it over fill the pot, causing spillages. Or does it short measure, encouraging guests to take a second measure.

8. **Utensils:** Check to make sure your utensils match the items with which they're paired. If you serve fruit, is this cut into spoon-sized chunks, or elegant slices? Either of course is fine, but just make sure that the serving utensils and plates or bowls you provide are suitable. Slices can't be eaten (or easily served) with a spoon; they need a knife and

fork, so only providing bowls to be served in is illogical. I frequently see ladles used for fruit salad, stewed fruit or bowls of yogurt. Have you ever tried serving from these ladles? A shallow spoon would make life a lot easier for the guest. Why complicate things?

9. Toast: Cold rubbery toast is a big criticism of many a hotel breakfast. But do rotary toasters perform any better? You've just plated up your bacon and eggs and head for the toast, only to find either there's a queue or the settings on the toaster make it possible to get the toast anything between completely underdone and burnt to a crisp. And of course while you're trying to perfect the colour of your toast, your bacon and eggs have gotten stone cold. I'm not saying rotary toasters are a complete no-no. Just check the settings so the toast only needs to go through once to make it look and feel like toast, and position it so guests can cook their toast before plating up their hot food.

10. Hot dishes: If you use lids on your hot dishes, are the dishes labelled so guest don't need to open each one to find the bacon? Is there somewhere to safely put the lids without having to do a balancing act. Or move them without dripping condensation on the floor and counter? Check your utensils' handles don't get too hot and guests burn themselves. And while on the subject of hot food, hot food put onto cold plates doesn't stay hot for long. Whatever your style of service, ensure you warm your plates as much as possible within the realms of safety.

Look and learn how well your layout works for your guests. Watch for your bottlenecks, and rearrange accordingly. What are the things that guests constantly ask for when it's there already? How much to-ing and fro-ing is there from table to buffet?

Make your breakfasts memorable, for the right reasons, and leave your guests relaxed with a positive last impression and an incentive to come back.