

## Do you have any reservations?

6 Jan 2007 by FT/ Nick Lander

'Good morning, Oxo Tower reservations, how can I help?'

By the end of just half an hour sitting in the subterranean, windowless basement opposite the five receptionists constantly at work at the Oxo Tower restaurant and brasserie to handle the 1,100 phone calls they receive daily my head was swirling with this phrase that they use, very politely, to answer each call.

I had asked to sit here because I had come to realise that while the technology in the kitchen today may be very different from what it was even a decade ago the most significant change in a customer's personal relationship with restaurants has taken place in how each booking is made and recorded.

In the past, and still today in smaller establishments, it is a relatively simple process: a large diary which doubles as the reservations book which invariably over the year sees a great deal of wear and tear as it is moved from the office to the front desk and is used to store information about requests for birthday cakes and customers' lost property. It is, at best, a system that is straightforward but fragile.

More commonly, today, your reservation will be taken directly into a computer which has been programmed with a specific reservations software (Quadranet and OpenTable are the two most common in use) which the receptionist at the front door will access with a trusty swipe card. It is these programmes which allow the receptionists to recall any previous relevant data with such speed, such as your telephone number, and allows them to build up a considerable amount of information on the clientele they want to look after. From a restaurateur's perspective it allows the receptionist to be aware constantly of how many tables are booked, how many are still available and how the whole process of managing tables can be handled more efficiently. At Oxo this allows them to allocate a limit of two and a half hours for a restaurant table and two hours for one in the brasserie, significantly boosting revenue.

I chose Oxo Tower not just for the complexity of its reservation system, (it serves 18-21,000 customers a month) but also because I had heard that for some time it had been refining its whole reservation process. This had begun four years ago when Sian Cox, a former teacher, currently Brasserie Manager but then in charge of all reservations, had visited several New York restaurants and come back with numerous ideas on how to streamline her system and, she hoped, to improve the service to her customers.

"The first thing I did," Cox explained "was to propose that we amalgamate the whole team, rather than have one half working for the brasserie and the other for the restaurant. That definitely helped, but far more beneficial was the practice I saw in Danny Meyer's restaurants where those who work on the reservations also have to work as waiters on the floor. Initially, it was difficult to get this started as waiters were worried about the tips they might lose, but we finally overcame this and it has worked very, very well for everybody. The benefits are huge. Receptionists now understand what happens on the floor and, perhaps more significantly, they can now recognise our regular customers who are now not just names and telephone numbers but faces and personalities."

Her overriding ambition, Cox continued, was to ensure that her receptionists became more than telesales for the business and in a significant move the room in which they sit had its name changed from Reservations to Sales Department. This has had a significant impact as better management of the reservations system has led to an increase of between 150 and 180 customers a week.

"What I also learnt in New York and now encourage our staff to do is listen to the customers and not just say 'No, I am sorry we don't have a booking at 8pm'. If they are American then they often appreciate the offer of a table at 6pm. If they sound Spanish they will appreciate a later table. And often if they are tourists who are here at the weekend and cannot get in on a Saturday night we invariably offer them a table on a Sunday when often they don't think we are open. And although we never promise a table by the window we always say that if you come at 5.30pm or 6pm then there is a much better chance of getting a table with a view."

Back in the basement the only view was of boxes of stationery, boards showing their reservations to date in the run-up to Christmas compared to last year (on which there was a significant increase) and shelves full of the food and drink items which Oxo produces in conjunction with its parent company, Harvey Nichols, which the receptionists are incentivised to sell to anyone coming to celebrate any special event.

On the far side of the central desk were three receptionists busy answering calls while I slipped into the empty chair between one receptionist reading over the vegetarian/vegan menu to a potential customer and Johann Govender, who had been Head Waiter in the brasserie, but is now Reservations Supervisor.

It was 11am, the busiest period of the day as that is when most PAs make their calls (the phones go slightly quieter after 1pm) and no sooner had I sat down than Govender's experience was called upon. One of his receptionists was on the phone to someone's PA, new to her job, who was ringing about a booking that had been made for her boss for 8pm for the coming Friday or Saturday evening but she did not know which day. Ominously, there was neither a record of the booking nor of the customer's phone number in the system. Govender asked for the call to be passed to him and while it was being transferred he looked at what the screen was telling him about availability on those particular evenings. By the time he had taken over the call he could see that he could fit in a party of four at 8pm on the Friday and the problem was resolved.

One of the most unexpected consequences of this job-sharing between reservation and waiting staff is that Govender and his colleagues have seen the worst side of their fellow-men. There were the stories of those who had used the pretext of a terminal illness to secure a window table and of another occasion when a waiter arrived at a table that had pleaded for a table with a window view for someone's birthday with Happy Birthday written in chocolate on the dessert plate only to find that this had clearly been purely a pretext.

But however elaborate today's reservation technology may have become, Govender and his fellow receptionists were all convinced that in terms of securing a table and that extra piece of service, nothing on the customer's part had really changed. The more polite the customer, the more likely they would be to help you.

**Oxo Tower**, Barge House Street, London SE1, 020-7803-3888.  
Open 7 days.