

Techniques for Increasing Servers' 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.

Techniques for Increasing Servers' Tips: How Generalizable Are They?

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. These data were collected from 100 companies that operate more than 11,000 restaurants with overall sales exceeding 42 billion. Put into perspective, at this rate, this particular group of companies will likely need to replace over 700,000 employees and nearly 15,000 managers at a cost that exceeds 1.8 billion dollars (Berta, 2006). 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).

According to Lynn (1996, 2003, 2004, 2006) managers can increase their servers' tips by training the servers to: (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, and (14) give customers candy. 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, Rind, Fisher and Lynn, 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 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 Lynn's (2003, 2004, 2006) tip enhancing techniques has been supported by research, those studies have focused primarily on small samples of one to 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 more diverse restaurants. In particular, as Lynn (2004) acknowledges, many of the behaviors he advocates seem less appropriate for upscale restaurants and may not increase tips at those types of establishments. In fact, there is some reason for believing that the effectiveness of these tip enhancing techniques may be limited. 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. In addition, 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 reported below was designed to address this issue of generalizability by testing the effectiveness of the techniques among a broader sample of servers and restaurants.

METHOD

Data Source

Current and former restaurant servers completed an online survey about their experiences on and opinions of the job. We recruited participants by sending invitations to students, as well as to members of commercial consumer lists (DataCorp) and panels (Zoomerang) who indicated 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 ($n = 580$). One thousand, six-hundred and six observations were retained for analysis, but sample sizes vary across those analyses due to missing values for some variables. Although some of the data from this survey has been previously used by Kwortnik, Lynn and Ross (2009), the relationships examined in that study were completely different from those reported here. In other words, all our findings are new.

Survey Questions

In addition to a series of questions about respondent demographic characteristics (sex, race, age, and number of years experience as a server), employer characteristics (restaurant name, average per-person bill size, and geographic location), and other issues not examined in this paper, 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 13 activities:

- (1) "Wore or carried something unusual such as an unusual (e.g., button, pen, or piece of 'flare')",
- (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," and
- (13) "Complimented your customers on their food choices."

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate how their tips compared to those earned by co-workers 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. [Note: We also asked servers to report their average tip percentages. This variable was much less reliably related to the tip enhancing

behaviors than was the comparative tip measure. However, it was arguably less sensitive than the comparative tip measure because it did not control for differences in average tip across restaurants as did the later measure. Therefore, only the results involving the comparative tip dependent variable are reported below.]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample Characteristics

The respondents to this survey ranged in age from 16 to 66 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 except Wyoming with breakdowns by U.S. Census Region as follows –West (18%), Midwest (25%), Northeast (23%), and South (34%). Their experience waiting tables ranged from less than 1 year to 50 years, with a mean of 7.5 years. To avoid problems with outliers, we used the natural logarithm of years experience in the analyses reported below. The servers worked at different independent and chain restaurants whose reported average per-person bill ranged from under \$5 to over \$100 with a mean of \$27.48. [Note: Ten values of per-person bill size under \$5 and 4 values over \$100 were recoded as missing values in order to keep these extreme and frankly questionable observations from biasing the results.]

Frequency of Service Behaviors

The reported frequency of engaging in each of the tip enhancing service behaviors is summarized in Table 1. A majority of servers never or only sometimes engage in the behaviors of 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 current server (y/n), years experience as a server, restaurant’s average per-person bill size, server age, server sex, server race (white/other), and region of the country (dummy coded: west, south and midwest (y/n) with northeast as the implicit comparison) indicated that the frequency of the behaviors varied across all these predictors (see Table 2). The results are too numerous to repeat here in full, but several of the findings 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, up-sell, 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 and/or effective than others, so it will be interesting to see if they correspond to the relative size of the tactics’ correlations with tips in this study. Second, servers at more expensive/up-scale 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) acknowledgement that 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 could reflect differential customer response to the behaviors depending on whether they come from waiters or waitresses, so 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 co-workers are presented in Table 2. 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 which if any of the behaviors predicted unique variance in comparative tip size, they were all added into a regression model along with the covariates previously described (see Table 4). In that analysis, only calling customers by name ($B = .11$, $t(1379) = 3.09$, $p < .005$), up-selling ($B = .11$, $t(1379) = 3.35$, $p < .005$), 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 than by less experienced servers – i.e., call the customer by name, up-sell, tell jokes or stories to customers, and squat next to the table – were 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 rule 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. This is a behavior that restaurant managers should remind their experienced servers to do more often. [Note: Introducing oneself by name had a significant negative effect in the simultaneous regression analysis controlling for all the other behaviors ($B = -.05$, $t(1379) = -2.07$, $p < .05$). Perhaps customers find such self-introductions annoying, but its negative effect on tips was suppressed or hidden in the earlier analyses by the fact that servers who do introduce themselves also do a number of other positive things such as smiling, touching customers, etc... .]

The generalizability of these behaviors' effects on tips was assessed in several ways. First, an index of how frequently servers engaged in all the behaviors was constructed 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- $r = .24$, $B = .50$, $t(1451) = 9.58$, $p < .001$). Then the product of this variable with each of the covariates/control-variables was entered into the regression model (see Table 5). Only status as a current (vs 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- $r = .21$, $B = .41111$, $t(1067) = 6.90$, $p < .001$), but it 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, several separate regression analyses were run to see if average per-person bill size moderated the effects of those behaviors engaged in more or less frequently at upscale restaurants – i.e., calling customer by name, introducing self, 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 Table 6). However, “often” or “always” wearing flair, squatting next to the table and/or drawing on the check was so rare among restaurants with per-person bill size greater than \$45 (n’s = 32, 29, and 9 respectively) that there may not have been enough power to detect expected interactions of these variables with restaurant expensiveness. What the data does suggest is that the tactics are effective at restaurants of all price levels where they are tried.

Finally, several separate regression analyses were run to see if server sex moderated the effects of those behaviors engaged in more or less frequently by female servers – i.e., introducing self, touching customers, smiling, writing “Thank You” on the check, drawing on the check, and wearing flair. Each of these behaviors was entered into a separate regression analysis along with the usual covariates, and the product of the behavior and server sex. None of the interactions terms was significant in these analyses (see Table 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.

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 co-workers were larger for those servers who more frequently used the tip enhancing behaviors identified and advocated by Lynn (1996, 2003, 2004, 2006). These correlational findings do not prove that engaging in the behaviors increased servers' average tips, but 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. What the current findings do indicate is that those effects are not limited to the small samples of servers and restaurants used in previous experimental research. The effects of these behaviors on tip size generalize to 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 a 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 it costs little. In fact, a training manual titled "Mega Tips" can be downloaded free of charge from the Cornell Center for Hospitality research website. Accordingly, we encourage restaurant managers to take a tip and train their servers to engage in these tip enhancing behaviors.

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Table 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	1596	1.45	72.9%	15.1%	6.2%	5.8%
Touch Customers	1593	1.68	50.0%	36.8%	8.9%	4.4%
Forecast Good Weather	1596	1.69	49.3%	34.8%	13.2%	2.8%
Wear Flair	1596	1.72	58.0%	22.6%	8.9%	10.5%
Squat Next to Table	1598	1.87	47.4%	28.7%	13.5%	10.4%
Call Customer by Name	1597	2.23	22.0%	42.4%	25.7%	9.8%
Write “Thank You” on Checks	1592	2.28	39.8%	20.1%	12.6%	27.4%
Tell Jokes or Stories	1591	2.45	8.4%	49.3%	31.5%	10.8%
Complement Customers’ Choices	1583	2.70	6.6%	33.3%	44.0%	16.1%
Repeat Customers’ Orders	1595	2.89	5.6%	30.1%	33.5%	30.8%
Smile	1592	2.97	7.0%	23.4%	34.9%	34.7%
Introduce Self	1598	3.01	17.0%	18.0%	12.2%	52.8%
Suggestive Selling	1588	3.09	5.7%	21.8%	30.7%	41.8%

Table 2. Regression analyses predicting the frequency of various server behaviors.

	Introduce Self	Customer Name	Up- Selling	Touch Customers	Repeat Order	Smile	Tell Jokes or Stories	Write Thanks on Check	Complement Customers' Choices	Wear Flair	Squatt next to table	Draw on the Check	Predict Good Weather
Intercept	3.77***	1.33***	2.50***	.66***	2.53***	2.14***	2.24***	1.54***	1.96***	1.20***	2.02***	1.12***	1.16***
West (y =1, n =0)	-.25*	.19**	.03	.18**	.02	-.002	.13	-.15	.03	.11	.19*	-.03	-.24***
South (y=1, n =0)	.27**	.11	.26***	.12*	.12	-.10	.09	-.13	.03	.14	.32***	-.08	-.28***
Midwest (y=1, n =0)	.23**	.18**	.23**	.06	.07	-.06	.03	.04	.03	.05	.12	-.09	-.10
Ave. Per-person Bill	-.004*	.004**	.002	.001	.000	-.002	.000	-.01***	.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	.000
Current Server (y =1, n = 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 (m=1, f=2)	-.14*	-.06	-.04	.13**	.05	.46***	-.05	.58***	.04	.25***	.02	.35***	.07
White Server (y=1, n =0)	.07	.13	.24**	.11	-.09	-.02	.19*	.17	.32***	.05	.25**	-.02	.14
R ²	.06	.12	.04	.08	.02	.06	.02	.09	.03	.03	.06	.07	.06

Table 3. Partial correlations between server behaviors and reported tip size as compared to that of co-workers.

	partial-r	n	p-value <
Tell Jokes or Stories	.22	1481	.001
Squat Next to Table	.18	1481	.001
Call Customer by Name	.18	1481	.001
Touch Customer	.16	1481	.001
Up Sell	.15	1481	.001
Smile	.15	1481	.001
Complement Customers	.14	1481	.001
Predict Good Weather	.11	1481	.001
Write "Thank You" on Checks	.09	1481	.001
Draw on Checks	.08	1481	.01
Wear Flair	.07	1481	.01
Introduce Self	.05	1481	.05
Repeat Order	.05	1481	.05

Table 4. Regression analysis predicting comparative tips.

	B	t (1379)	p-value <	partial-r
Intercept	3.62	14.06	.001	
West (y=1, n=0)	.16	2.61	.01	.07
South (y=1, n=0)	-.05	-.61	n.s.	-.02
Midwest (y=1, n=0)	-.06	-.84	n.s.	-.02
Ave. Per-person Bill	.03	.40	n.s.	.01
Current Server (y=1, n=0)	.002	1.08	n.s.	.03
Years Experience	.02	3.88	.001	.10
Server Age	-.01	-2.78	.007	-.08
Server Sex	-.18	-2.92	.004	-.08
White Server (y=1, n=0)	.04	.41	n.s.	.01
Introduce Self	-.05	-2.07	.04	-.06
Call Customer by Name	.11	3.09	.003	.08
Up Sell	.11	3.34	.002	.09
Touch Customer	.04	.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	.89	n.s.	.02
Complement Customer	.04	1.05	n.s.	.03

Wear Flair	.02	.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	.82	n.s.	.02

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analysis predicting comparative tips.

	B	t	p-value <	partial-r
STEP 1 (df = 1451)				
Intercept	4.06	19.00	.001	
West (y=1, n=0)	.000	.004	n.s.	.000
South (y=1, n=0)	-.05	-.69	n.s.	-.02
Midwest (y=1, n=0)	.01	.18	n.s.	.01
Ave. Per-person Bill	.002	1.57	n.s.	.04
Current Server (y=1, n=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 (y=1, n=0)	.08	.81	n.s.	.02
Behavior Index	.50	9.58	.001	.24
STEP 2 (df = 1442)				
Behavior Index X West	.09	.21	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index X South	-.59	-1.59	n.s.	-.04
Behavior Index X Midwest	.30	.76	n.s.	.02
Behavior Index X Bill	.001	.14	n.s.	.004
Behavior Index X Current	.80	2.55	.02	.07
Behavior Index X Years	.004	.40	n.s.	.01

Behavior Index X age	.003	.34	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index X Sex	.05	.45	n.s.	.01
Behavior Index X Race	-.25	-1.32	n.s.	-.04

Table 6. Results for interaction terms in twelve separate regression analyses predicting comparative tips.

	df	B	t	p-value <	partial-r
Bill X Introduce Self	1451	.000	-.78	n.s.	-.02
Bill X Customer Name	1449	.001	.51	n.s.	.01
Bill X Write "Thank You"	1446	.000	-.78	n.s.	-.02
Bill X Wear Flair	1448	.000	-.54	n.s.	-.01
Bill X Squat Next to Table	1450	.002	1.14	n.s.	.03
Bill X Draw on Check	1448	.000	-.31	n.s.	-.01
Sex X Introduce Self	1451	-.04	-.88	n.s.	-.02
Sex X Touch Customers	1445	.08	1.09	n.s.	.03
Sex X Smile	1446	-.03	-.50	n.s.	-.01
Sex X Write "Thank You"	1446	-.01	-.20	n.s.	-.01
Sex X Wear Flair	1448	.02	.24	n.s.	.01
Sex X Draw on Check	1448	-.02	-.23	n.s.	-.01