Guest Care & Relations

Introduction

Guests are the key focus of your enterprise. You must train your staff and concentrate on all your service staff. They must be aware of guest care and be committed to providing excellent guest service and care. Your jobs depend on the survival of the company, and the company’s survival depends on guest satisfaction. Dealing with complaints and problems can be very time consuming, and they always occur when you are at your busiest. Satisfied guests tell other people, who enhance our reputation and gives us new guests - cost-free marketing. Happy guests bring job satisfaction and will motivate you and your staff.
Statistically, a happy guest will tell 3 - 4 people about their experience, an unhappy guest will tell 12 - 15 people. Word of mouth can make or break your business. Communication is very important. It is not what we say to a guest but how we say it, what words we use and what tone of voice we use our body language and facial expression. Body language and facial expressions are 55% of good communication. Learn to interpret a guest’s body language as to how the guest is feeling and react accordingly. Keep eye contact, be attentive and nod your head. Listen not just to what is being said, but how it is said. Do not think of something else while a guest is talking to you. Get involved, introduce yourself and work on a positive relationship immediately. Guests visiting your camps want value for money. You, therefore, must work harder to satisfy their needs and provide a better product than our opposition, without going over budget. We must treat guests as individuals and show them that they are important.
10 commandments of good guest care & relations

- Guests are the most important people in your business.
- Guests are not dependent on you; you are dependent on them.
- Guests do you a favour by going to your camps, not you doing them a favour by giving them good service.
- The guests are part of your business, not an outsider.
- Guests are not a cold statistic; they are flesh and blood human beings with feelings and emotions like your own - they are not just money in the cash register.
- Guests are not people to argue with.
- Guests come to you with their needs and wants. It is your job to fulfil them.
- Guests deserve the most courteous attention you can give them.
- Guests are the people that make it possible to pay your salary.
- Guests are the lifeblood of your organization.
Handling guest complaints

Take guest complaints very seriously. If you think a guest did not have a good experience and is going to complain, notify your general manager immediately and send a report of your view of the situation. Handle all complaints about your lodge, staff, food or service professionally and do not take offence if you get complaints. Valid complaints must be viewed as feedback, to improve the operation of your camp. Remember with providing a service, you or your staff can make mistakes and may inconvenience a guest if so, you must make amends.

Guests must know who to complain to and feel at ease to speak freely if they have a complaint. Listen actively to the complaint, never interrupt the guests, apologize and respond quickly. Do not take the complaint personally. Find out what outcome the guest wants and offer a solution. Always use tact and courtesy when dealing with unhappy guests. Make sure you get to the heart of the problem. Never give an excuse or be defensive. No excuse is good enough. Immediately implement action after a complaint and follow up. Make sure the guest is satisfied with the action taken. The guests will feel important because you took the time and effort to resolve their complaint. Learn from your mistakes and find out the cause of the problem. Call in the staff member that was responsible for the mistake, explain what he did wrong, what the consequences were and how to avoid it in future. It costs on average 5 times more to try and get new guests than to keep existing guests. Turn a complaint into a positive experience. “Your guests are your business and happy guests are an even bigger business.” Your aim must be to exceed the expectations of your guests. In doing so we must treat every guest as the most important person in the world and manage every aspect of our service as if it were the most important.
Interruptions

Train your staff not to interrupt you when you are dealing with guests.

Get them to ask the following questions:

- How important or urgent is it?
- Can it be dealt with later?

If the need arises for them to interrupt you, give them a sign that you will be with them and excuse yourself. Avoid small talk with other management when you are in the company of guests.
V.V.I.P. Guests

All guests are very important. Some guests though can bring you a good deal of additional business and you only get one chance to impress them.

- Find out as much about the guest before they arrive.
- What type of business they are in?
- Do they have any special dietary requirements?
- Do they have preferred drinks, snacks etc?
- If you get this info, ensure that you order what is necessary.
- They must get the best accommodation, specialist guide, vehicle and service.
- Put extra “we care” touches in the tent and bathroom.
- Flowers, a bottle of wine, a handwritten welcome note, fruit in a basket, an extra magazine or two which would interest them.
- A nice arrangement of dry grasses in the room and bathroom.
- Make sure there are lots of “we care” touches and that they are neatly and attractively arranged.
- A public relations person should be appointed who is excellent with people and knows what pleases them.
- The PR person will meet them at the airport or reserve entry point and accompany them throughout their stay in your lodge(s).
- If the guests do not come with their own specialist guide, the manager or specialist guide must take them on all their activities, from meeting them at the airstrip to taking them back to the airstrip.
Liaise with the PR person if you need to do any special bush braais or dinners. All meals must have loads of “we care” touches, e.g. white tablecloths and napkins, cigars if they are smokers, nuts and crisps in special baskets are but a few examples.

Give the PR 100% support as they will know the importance of the group, no matter how much extra effort this is. You only get one chance.

Give them a complimentary lodge-branded shirt, coffee table book or other little presents which will make them feel special. Most of the time drinks would be complimentary or be included in accommodation price.

If the managing director or general manager cannot spend a night with these guests, they must meet them on arrival and departure at the airport and spend time with them.

Arrange immigration/visa forms for them if needed.
Travel agents

Give them the **full treatment**. Best room/tent and vehicle, the guide must be the manager, assistant manager or specialist guide. If it is a short-term inspection with lunch, make sure there are at least one hot dish and salads or homemade cakes and savouries for tea. Pick them up from the airstrip or reserve entrance personally and chat to them on a slow drive back into camp. All staff must be in uniform. Every agent must get a **presentation of the camp**. In the presentation, you must sell your camps’ uniqueness and beauty. It depends on you whether the agents are impressed enough to send guests to your camp with confidence.
The presentation must include the following:

- Why your camp is so special.
- When is the best time for birding, fishing and game viewing?
- When is the rainy season and how much or little it rains?
- When it is winter/summer and what you need to bring in these seasons.
- Why there is a luggage limit and how important it is to stick to it.
- Laundry is done daily.
- How many guests you can accommodate.
- Each agent must receive a brochure and a map if they do not already have one.
Discuss misunderstandings that you have had with previous guests that the agents might have sent to you.

Discuss private vehicles and private/specialist guides.

Explain that specific dietary requirements can be catered for if advanced notice is given.

Explain the drinks policies.

Explain that special requests such as wine or messages in rooms on arrival can be arranged in advance.

Tell them how professional, experienced and well trained your staff are.

Plus, anything else that you think will impress them.

Emphasise safety.

Take them for a bush dinner/lunch or give them surprise sundowners with hot and cold snacks.
Smoking

It is a good policy that no staff member may be permitted to smoke in front of guests. A “no smoking” policy must also be strictly enforced with guests on boats, vehicles and canoes. Guides must stop for a smoke break if requested by guests. No smoking at the dinner table is the norm all over the world. Maintain this if possible, but also be flexible, where necessary, for example, if the whole group/table smokes (common with the Japanese), but only if no other groups of guests are present.

Respect both the rights of the smokers and non-smokers but remember that non-smokers frequently become very annoyed if made to inhale second-hand smoke. Ensure that this does not occur. No smoking is allowed in any aircraft, should your lodge offer this service.
Age restrictions

Your camps may have a minimum age requirement of 8 years. This is appropriate in areas where camps are not surrounded by game fencing or access points that are strictly controlled.

If this is not the case, you may consider waiving this restriction by booking the party with young children into smaller camps with exclusive use. Age restrictions exist with the dual purpose of ensuring safety and increasing guest satisfaction. You may often lose bookings and revenue by having a minimum age restriction in your camps but understand that this age restriction is important as it improves the overall experience of guests who are booked into your camps.

Parties with children between the ages of 8 and 12 may be required to book private activities (unless they have booked the camps on an exclusive basis). This may necessitate additional costs to the itinerary and certain camps or at certain times of the year. Younger children generally do not have the same attention span as adults, and this can impact on other guests whilst on activities. Children should only be accepted if these private activities have been booked.
Bushwalks, camping safaris and Overlanding excursions

A minimum age requirement of 12 years applies to all the cross country and camping safaris, should you offer these activities. You might also consider an upper age limit of 70 years on certain safaris due to their active nature.

If there is a chance of encountering dangerous game during bush walks (black rhino, buffalo & elephant specifically) a prudent age requirement is 14 or 16 years.
Lost luggage

Please make sure that when you have a guest arrive who has lost luggage, advise the guest that the chances of them getting their luggage returned to them during their stay with you will be very slim. By telling them this, if you can get their luggage to them they will be happy with the service you have delivered to them. However, promising them that you will have their luggage delivered to them within a short period, indicates to the guest that you have taken responsibility for the luggage.

They then may expect you to deliver the luggage to them at no extra cost. “You cannot carry the cost” and on top of this, the guests now blame you for not having their bags delivered to them when they do not arrive. This is a clear example of under-promising and over-delivering.
Tipping/gratuity policy

A sensible inclusion of the guests’ pre-tour policy/guide is as follows: “Tipping should not be compulsory”. If, however, you want to encourage tipping in response to excellent service, enclosed is a brief guideline. There are the recommended categories of staff members that may receive gratuities.

- **Guides**: US$5 - US$10 per guest per day if the guide has done a good job.

- **Specialist guides**: Some specialist guides are well paid to accompany you, and their professional fees may be included with your itinerary. However, others are lodge employees, and for exceptional service, US$20 per guest per day is appropriate.

- **General camp staff**: US$5 per guest per day. This should be placed in the communal tipping box (where provided) to be distributed amongst all the staff, including those that work “behind the scenes”.

- **Trackers / Mokoro polers**: (Where appropriate). They are generally great capitalists and achieve better results if they are being rewarded directly by the guests for their hard work. They have an added incentive to put in that extra effort to ensure that the guest has a memorable experience. We recommend that each receive US$5 per guest per day.
International guest ticket confirmations

- It is recommended that all airline tickets be confirmed.

- This will take a minimum of 24 hours, so plan ahead.

- This is not strictly a function of a lodge but is considered an excellent “extra touch” that will be most welcome, especially if a delay or change of schedules occurs.
Check outs

- Check if they have a bar account.
- Check if guests are travelling back by air and have a valid ticket.
- Check for telephone calls, faxes and e-mails.
- When paying with Travellers Cheques, make sure they are signed on the right line, but not dated.
- If guests want to pay gratuities on a credit card a separate credit card slip must be made out and recorded in a duplicate book.
- These slips should be sent to your head office weekly so that the cash can be sent back to camp as soon as possible.
- Please explain to your staff that bank charges may be taken off the amount.
Booking sheets

- One updated copy of the booking sheets must be kept in camp and one sent to your head office.
- This is important for any future queries (e.g. cancellations and new bookings).
Rooming lists

- To be done about 5 days in advance.
- Doing this in advance helps you pick up group bookings and honeymooners etc. and to arrange your tent allocations accordingly.
- Try to keep group bookings together, as they might be a family with children.
- Always remember to place singles closer to the dining area, as they could be ladies travelling on their own.
- Always specify on rooming lists any extra information (dietary requirements, etc.)
- State how many days staying, how many people to a tent and what nationality they are.
- This makes capturing data for hotel statistics easier as it is on hand in your daily list.
Departure notes

- Departure notes and evaluation forms must be left in the tents on the evening before departing.

- An envelope must be supplied with the form.

- The note and evaluation form must be presented with a nice touch e.g. grasses, pods, different languages etc.
Luggage collection

- Make sure that arriving and departing guests do not overlap and that bags are collected at least one hour before departure.

- If there is an early arrival, please request that the departing guests leave their tent in time to get it ready for the new guests or re-allocate tents on your rooming list to accommodate times.