First-shift customer service skills for café staff

A first-shift service briefing should show how a customer request travels from the first conversation to delivery. Agree the details staff must confirm, such as the item, quantity, timing and any access or allergy-related information that needs the appropriate specialist process. Give new starters a clear route for checking availability and resolving uncertainty before promising an outcome.

UK hospitality and visitor-facing service skills; original operational practice course.

The practical principles

Start with a useful welcome

Acknowledge a waiting customer and explain the next step. Ask a focused question to understand what they need, then listen without rushing to an answer. Confirm important details such as the booking name, requested time or accessibility requirement. A good welcome gives the customer confidence that their request has reached someone who will act on it.

Set expectations you can meet

Check availability before making a commitment. Give a realistic estimate and explain relevant options, including any cost or condition. If the situation changes, update the customer promptly and offer the next available action. Use plain language and take care with names, dates and numbers. Where another team must help, explain who will take over and pass the details accurately.

Complete and learn

Check that the promised action happened and that the customer knows what comes next. A handover is complete when the receiving person understands and accepts it. Record useful service issues through the agreed process so recurring delays can be improved. Protect personal information and keep access needs discreet. Consistency across shifts is often more useful than an impressive promise that the next shift cannot fulfil.

Work through a shift scenario

Fictional exercise: a guest asks for a quiet table and says they have limited time before a performance. The host checks what can be offered, repeats the agreed arrangement and hands the timing request to the server. If the kitchen later reports a delay, the server updates the guest early and discusses available choices within their authority. A request only helps when the colleague fulfilling it receives it.

Avoid the common failure

A friendly conversation can still end in poor service when a promise is never recorded or handed over. Use short confirmations and name the next responsible colleague. At the end, ask whether the agreed need was met and pass recurring operational issues to the manager.

A second situation to discuss

Fictional scenario: A table will be ready later than promised and a guest has a train to catch.

Give a truthful update, check what timing matters to the guest and offer feasible alternatives. Ask the duty manager about options within policy. Confirm the chosen arrangement and hand it over clearly to the team.

Use a working record

Record the specific arrangements below before the briefing. Keep the wording short enough for a colleague to use during the shift. Where a field does not apply, explain why; where information is missing, assign a person to resolve it. Store personal or sensitive details in the business's approved system.

- Request
- checked availability
- promise made
- responsible colleague
- handover time
- change communicated
- completion

At the next handover, ask what changed, which action remains open and who now owns it. Close the record only when the agreed follow-up is complete. A recurring problem should inform the next briefing and the relevant operational procedure.

Check understanding

Before promising availability:

Check it Reliable commitments depend on verified availability.

A delay should trigger:

An update and realistic options Early updates let customers make informed choices.

Customer service exercise: a promised table is still occupied

A family arrives for a confirmed booking. Their table is occupied and the host has already given two optimistic waiting times. What would a useful third conversation sound like?

Compare your decision

Acknowledge the missed estimates, check what options are actually available and offer a choice the venue can deliver. For example, "I can seat four of you in the quieter room now, or I can check this table again at seven and update you personally."

Role-play the guest declining both options. The host should know who can offer another remedy and agree a time for the next update rather than leaving the family to ask again.

Sources and scope

Original workplace examples and suggested record. Prepared 19 October 2026. Use the current linked guidance and the venue's procedures for operational decisions.

Use this on shift

Resource page and fillable working record · Read the online guide · Course details