



UNDER PRESSURE

WHAT HOLIDAY SHIFTS REVEAL



By Brandon Willey

The holiday rush has a way of finding the weak spots in an operation.

School-break crowds, corporate holiday parties, and guests entertaining visiting relatives can all converge during the same few weeks alongside regular traffic. While the added volume can make the holidays one of the most profitable periods of the year, it can also magnify problems that are easier to manage when the center isn't packed.

An employee might be unsure about handling a guest complaint and suddenly has three people waiting. A communication gap between the front desk and kitchen becomes much more noticeable when both are slammed. Or a manager who normally has time to step in and solve every problem may find five of them competing for attention.

Holiday pressure tests how well your team can execute what's already in place when the pace is faster and problems arrive two or three at a time.

WHEN THE PRESSURE GOES UP

The first major holiday weekend is a bad time to discover that employees are unclear on policies or don't know who has authority to resolve a guest complaint. Having a focused refresher two to four weeks before peak traffic can concentrate on the area's most likely to be stressed.

Cross-training can help, too. A lane attendant doesn't need to become an expert cashier but knowing how to answer basic guest questions or help manage a queue can make a difference when another department becomes overwhelmed. Seasonal and newer employees may need extra attention because they're still learning the normal process and what happens when that process breaks down.

During peak shifts, problems rarely arrive one at a time. An employee may be solving a guest issue while answering the phone, checking in

another group and watching the lobby queue grow. Role-playing a few familiar situations before the holidays gives the team a chance to work through that pressure before it happens for real.

A family, for example, might arrive 20 minutes late for a sold-out bowling reservation while a birthday party is still waiting on food. Or two groups may believe they have the same lane while the front desk is already backed up. An arcade guest whose credits disappeared when a game failed adds another kind of problem that may need a quick decision. Each situation is manageable on its own; the challenge is handling it when several demands are competing for attention.

Watching those scenarios play out can tell managers a lot about how the team responds under pressure. Do employees acknowledge the guest quickly? Can they explain what's happening without blaming another department? Do they know what they can resolve themselves and when a manager needs to become involved? Just as important, are departments communicating with one another, or is each operating on its own island?

THE \$10 DECISION

Busy shifts also expose how much authority employees actually have. If a lane is down for a predetermined amount of time, does the employee know what recovery options are available? If a complaint involves a small dollar amount, can a supervisor resolve it without finding the GM?

Uncertainty slows decisions and creates a bottleneck when every small problem makes its way to the same manager. Employees shouldn't have to track down the general manager for every \$10 decision while a frustrated guest waits at the counter. Clear operating boundaries let routine problems get resolved faster and leave managers available for situations that need them.

A five-minute shift huddle can reinforce those boundaries while giving everyone a useful picture of what's coming. Expected volume, reservations, parties, corporate groups, leagues, and projected walk-in



traffic help the team anticipate where the pressure may build. Staffing assignments, thin coverage areas and known issues involving lanes, attractions, games, kitchen equipment, or menu items are useful to know before the doors get busy, too.

The information should travel both ways. Frontline employees may already know about a reservation issue, equipment problem or guest concern management hasn't seen. A quick conversation before the rush gives those issues somewhere to surface early, while there is still time to adjust.

Training also has to be consistent. When employees receive different answers depending on who is working, they hesitate, escalate routine decisions, and send everything back to the manager. **"This gives the team clear, concise and consistent information,"** O'Neal says. A shared process also gives leaders a fair foundation for accountability.

Trust also depends on knowing who owns what. O'Neal recommends a clear management hierarchy with defined areas of responsibility. Employees know where to turn, managers understand what they should handle and the owner is less likely to become the default answer for every question.

WHEN MANAGERS GET STUCK

One of the biggest risks during a holiday rush is having the manager-on-duty become another frontline employee. If check-in gets backed up and the manager jumps in, that may be exactly what's needed at the moment. But if the manager is still there 45 minutes later, who is watching everything else?

Managers need enough mobility to see the entire operation. A simple "rush walk" can regularly take the manager from the entrance and check-in area through the bowling lanes, restrooms, arcade and other attractions, kitchen, party rooms, and group spaces. It gives the manager a chance to catch developing problems before they become guest complaints.

WHAT SATURDAY REVEALS

Some of the best operational information comes from the busiest shifts. Unfortunately, much of it disappears when everyone clocks out. A quick post-shift conversation with managers and supervisors can capture what happened while it's still fresh without turning the end of the night into another long meeting.

Where did queues develop? Which department became overwhelmed first? Were there recurring guest complaints? Did equipment or technology cause problems? Were staffing levels appropriate? Were

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employees unclear about a procedure? Where did communication break down? What worked particularly well? Those answers can reveal patterns that are hard to see while everyone is in the middle of the rush.

A short debrief can focus on what should change before the next peak shift and who will make that change. If the kitchen repeatedly falls behind at the same point in the evening, that's useful information. If employees keep calling a manager for the same small guest recovery, that tells you something, too. If a staffing adjustment kept the front desk moving on Saturday, Sunday's team should know about it.

The real value comes from closing that loop. If Saturday's team learns something, Sunday's team should benefit from it.

READY FOR THE IMPERFECT SHIFT

Holiday weeks will always deliver surprises, and the busiest shifts quickly show where your operation gets sticky. Employees hesitate, communication drops off, managers become bottlenecks or the same problem keeps returning.

Once the pace settles down, those trouble spots are worth another look. What did the holiday rush expose about your operation that an ordinary Saturday never would, and what would you want your team to handle differently before the next one?



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