

101 THINGS EVERY CAFE OPERATOR SHOULD ASK THEMSELVES



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As a café owner/manager you will have had the joys of discovering that the dream of creating an incredible space for people to hang out, spending all day on perfecting your latte art and chatting the meaning of life with everyone, soon become tiresome matters of spreadsheets, having difficult conversations with people who are friends but now work with you, finding suppliers for hand soap dispensers, light bulbs, cups, bin collections and lists that ensure you never run out of things like toilet roll.

We've created a list of 101 things every café operator should consider; to inspire you to keep perspective and keep the dream alive.

Feel free to share this with your teams.

Here we go...

CULTURE TIPS

- Culture setting.** Your culture is your greatest asset. It will be a mix of your values and vision and the team who work for you as you find your rhythms as a café. Try to articulate them; write them down and communicate them to your team. People bring culture to life.
- Guests.** Call your customers 'guests'. This sets a culture of hosting people, rather than just selling to them.
- Home.** Aim to create a relaxed setting like home. Creating a setting is more than trendy tables and chairs.
- Create an experience.** Turn your drinks into an experience. It should be a drink you can't make unless you've got really costly equipment or a lot of time and faff to make. This keeps people coming back. Espresso-based drinks are great for this. But also serve loose leaf teas with a teapot and tray. It becomes an experience.
- Staff attitude sets the atmosphere.** Ensure staff know how CRUCIAL they are for setting the atmosphere in a café. Repeat this a lot.
- Dream again.** Give yourself time to dream regularly. Get away from the day-to-day and go back to your first dream for the café. There will be loads of fantastic unique ideas that have been forgotten in light of operational tasks. Your uniqueness is what your guests love the most.
- Are the cups warm?** Customers will think their drink is cold if the cup is cold. We have most complaints about temperature when served in a cold cup. Heat your cup under hot water before use or on top of an espresso machine.
- Get the espresso right.** Is the espresso shot pouring at the correct time, consistently, every drink? The general rule is 25 seconds. (This may vary with your coffee – ask your roaster). Such a simple rule but makes a world of difference to the taste of the drink.
- Good milk.** Does the steamed milk look like melted ice cream? We use this analogy to help staff visually check their drinks look good for our guests (customers).
- Climb every "foam-tain".** Have I created micro-foam or mountain-foam? We want tiny bubbles to make the foam on a cappuccino or steamed drink.
- Steam arm tip.** Is the steam arm cleaned every time? Customers do not want to see their milk being steamed with dried-on, crusty milk stick on the steam arm. It's quick and straightforward if cleaned with cloth every time.
- Are you tamping your coffee flat?** If the tamper isn't horizontal, the coffee will rush through one side of the portafilter and under-extract.
- Espresso Tip.** Catching the espresso shot in a glass can save you getting coffee on the bottom of your cups. (from previous drinks).
- Use a towel** to clean the portafilter on every shot (not hot water... coffee oils will keep it seasoned)
- Is the Milk a good temperature?** Please don't use scorching hot milk. Coffees taste sweeter cooler. But you may get them all back if they are too tepid. Agree as a team and keep consistent.

16. **Ensure you serve drink in a clean cup.** Sounds obvious but how many pubs have you been to where you have a dirty glass? Off-putting. Give a quick look at the cup every time – don't assume its clean.
17. **Drink Recipe.** Ensure all staff are serving your drinks to YOUR chosen recipe - no 'glugs' of syrup - '2 pumps' etc. Where some baristas think they are generous with more, customers can get a sickly sweet drink. This applies to lots of ingredients.
18. **Does the cappuccino have foam?** Not half a cup, but more than a latte.
19. **Always offer milk alternatives** - Oat is very popular right now, but also think about soya, coconut etc.

MENU TIPS

20. **Do you have a special drink** - everyone talks about it. For us, it was a chunk. Mocha with squirty cream, choc drizzle and mars bar pieces chopped up in top. It's enjoyed and ordered but by no means the most popular drink on the menu. But people love talking about it, and your best marketing is word of mouth (more of that later).
21. **Menu Boards.** Are your menu boards easy to read and simple to order from?
22. **Have you got personal touches on your menu boards** - you're independent, so you have a LOT more control over these unique touches than big chains.
23. **Sugar, Sweetener and condiments are well-stocked** - people want to chill out not search for sugar.
24. **Price all your cakes on display.** Some customers would instead not order than ask a price.
25. **Get all prices correct in the till.** It makes life a lot easier for staff if they have the right buttons with the right prices.
26. **Get your cakes and grab items by the till.** Tempt everyone in the queue with sweet treats.
27. **Keep good stock** - don't run out of your most popular cakes.
28. **Put out a full tray of traybakes.** I have tested this - I put out 2 or 3 brownies, and they don't sell. I put out 12 brownies, and they can sell out. Same customers. Weird but true. Try it.
29. **Always offer glass and ice** with bottle drinks or cans. Create a better experience.
30. **Offer children's drinks.** This matters more than you realise to some people. These become loyal for life with simple additional menu lines. Kids bring parents back.
31. **Have a secret drink.** Make sure if a guest asks for inspiration for a drink, your staff can offer a secret surprise drink - not on the menu - it may be a special flavour or combination of flavours latte - Banoffee coffee (Caramel & Banana syrup in latte).
32. **Find out which cakes are a staff's favourite and tell them to talk about them.** Staff sell things they love much better than things they less passionate about. If they don't know - give them a free cake to find out.
33. **Vegan cake** is also very appreciated by people who are vegan, and they taste great - win-win.
34. **You don't have to SHOUT if it's vegan or gluten-free.** Customers can be put off thinking it will taste inferior - even though you know it tastes great. Try and find a way of advertising with GF or V for those looking for it.
35. **Key Information.** Laminate all KEY INFO sheets - e.g. allergens - on sheets and keep behind the bar, so staff are always equipped to answer questions.

FINANCIALS TIPS

36. **Are your prices up to date** - you must assess prices at least every six months. Suppliers have a habit of changing their prices.
37. **Are you stocking the right products?** Check with your waste lists (always keep a wastage list). Don't sell one cake and bin two. Stop the line.
38. **Have a strict rule about your costs : price ratio.** Never sell a product for less than 50% margin. (I.e it costs you 50p; you must sell for £1+vat). You can always price higher, but don't price too low. You'll go out of business.
39. **Set targets across your P&L** - set targets for how much of your budget you want to spend & hit the targets. Cost of sales, salaries, rent, overheads, profit. EG if you aim to spend 30% on Cost of sale. Make changes, so you hit this. A good target ratio is 25% cost of sales, 30% salaries, 15% rent 15% overheads, 15% profit.
40. **Get a good accountant**
41. **Understand the VAT impact** early in your business and don't get behind.

CUSTOMERS FIRST IMPRESSIONS

42. **Welcome!**
43. **Nice doormat/clean doorway.** Keep the entrance visually strong.
44. **Is the cafe what I dreamed of?** Am I focused so much on the perfect coffee shot that I'm not keeping the tables clear and clean?
45. **Keep guest areas ready!** Tables clean, toilet cleaned and stocked, sugars, spoons napkins, menu? Etc. Re-set tables properly for guests arrival.
46. **Papers or free reading materials** - becoming less necessary with gadgets but sets a nice tone that you welcome a lazy coffee and paper.
47. **Don't let any guests think you want them gone.** Buy more tables if you need, but don't rush a guest. They won't come back.

SERVICE TIPS

48. **Speed** - be efficient but quality matters. Don't cut corners to be too quick.
49. **Smile!** Customer service is giving the customer the experience they expect, despite how you're feeling that day.
50. **Speak** - name the drink as you deliver, say 'enjoy' ask how they are? Etc
51. **Challenge Staff to 'turn that frown upside down'**. Some guests who are a bit prickly or visibly not happy or got a problem with something in your cafe. More times than not, they have come in to switch off and relax from stuff going on in life. It's usually not personal to you or your café, after all, they chose to come in. So win them with great service, turn complaints into wins with care and empathy. There's nothing better than watching a guest go away more content than when they came in.
52. **Eye contact.** It's a powerful way of meaningfully connecting.
53. **Take a breath** as you serve someone at the till - literally. Make it a moment - not just a transaction, especially if you are really rushed off your feet.
54. **Put your most people-person staff member on the till** - not just the person who prefers it. You'll know who they are.
55. **Free moment?** Work the room. Chat to people. Don't sit and 'spoil' their moment. But one or two comments/minutes is sometimes really appreciated- especially customers on their own. You may be the only person they speak to that day.
56. **Refund.** Always give a refund or replace a drink/cake even for the tiniest complaint. Graciousness is the best advert. Give free cake too.
57. **Understanding your customers better.** Allow & encourage staff to build friendships with customers, so they know when someone is a bit off it or absent. (This sometimes needs your endorsement so they know they can be seen chatting).

MARKETING TIPS

58. **Who and Why.** Make sure people know who you are and why you're doing what you're doing. Guests will build more loyalty with you as people.
59. **Word of mouth** is your best friend. You can spend tons of cash on campaigns and strategies (some very successfully) but know that anything that gets people talking or telling a story with you in it will be your best way of growing your café business.
60. **Never pay hundreds of pounds to get an advert** in a local 'adverts magazine' (advertising in a local school/club/organisation leaflet is good though and helps them raise money).
61. **Never pay for the tv screen advert** at your local pharmacy/sports centre.
62. **Be present on social media.** Know where your target customer base hangs out online. Our most popular for our first café is still Facebook. This gets most interaction for our local audience and demographic. If you've got time, then do them all but don't have a stale page with one post every two months.
63. **Connect with local groups** - host barista events for brownies, scouts etc. Get the local primary school to bring Reception with their 50p's to each queue and buy milk to get confident in a shop.
64. **Have a voice in your local high street traders group.** Your collective success will always have a positive impact on your establishment.

STAFFING TIPS

65. **Relational.** Hang out with staff for first 20mins of day or shift.
66. **Keep staff energised** by making sure they know one positive thing that they bring to the team that is unique to them
67. **Managing staff golden rule no.1:** Let staff be better at something than you and give credit.
68. **Managing staff golden rule no.2:** Keep staff motivated by communicating the 'why' you do what you do. People are far more driven by purpose than we realise. Purpose builds loyalty more than wage.
69. **Managing staff golden rule no.3:** Trust your team. Leave them to it. Don't feel the need to be present every day. It will ensure your business never controls you and shows incredible trust in the team.
70. **Staff issues?** Raise small points quickly and don't let small issues become big and out of perspective
71. **Conflict** - deal with conflict and make sure issues don't ruin your relationships. If you have conflict, try to have some chat/banter soon after to show you don't want the conflict to ruin your relationship.
72. **Dress Code.** Make sure staff know your uniform expectations.
73. **Clean aprons**
74. **Make sure all the equipment needed for doing a job is there.** Short of teaspoons or cloths etc. is frustrating.
75. **Training.** Well trained staff gives confidence for a better service to guests.
76. **Recruitment.** Employ based on a character fit, rather than barista experience. You want a staff team who are good with people. You can train Barista skills to anyone.
77. **Leading Tip.** Never ask a staff member to do something you're not prepared to do yourself. E.g. clean toilets. Leaders who are willing to roll their sleeves up get way more respect and buy-in from staff.

78. **Rules shouldn't stop Dialogue.** Set boundaries for things like Annual/special Leave and be clear on your policies. Clarity is crucial for commitment.
79. **Staff Forum.** Have a staff private staff forum for discussion. For example, a Facebook page so people can leave useful messages, ask questions and lark about leaving funny pictures and say nice about one another.
80. **Single Issue.** Don't use the general staff forum to raise an individual issue for one person - keep this face to face.
81. **Shared Drive.** Keep all admin files on a shared folder - e.g. Dropbox or Google docs, so so these can be shared live with everyone. E.g. rota, staff handbook, policies, HACCP Info, contacts
82. **Take 5.** There will always be tasks to do, but if your team have been really busy, encourage them to sit down/rest for 5 mins when it goes quiet. Energy is needed for doing this job well. Staff must self-manage their time well.
83. **You may have to repeat yourself.** There is a lot to take in for staff members, especially in a constantly adapting environment. Just repeat yourself, and don't get frustrated.

GENERAL TIPS

84. **Ask your staff team what changes they would make.** Everyone has different perspectives, so you will create a great list of improvements
85. **Clear & Clean** tables within 2 minutes of a guest leaving - no one wants to arrive at a dirty table.
86. **Have background music on.** If a customer comes in, and it's a less busy time, it can feel like a funeral. Not conducive to welcoming café.
87. **Don't have music too loud or too quiet.**
88. **Quiet? No customers?** Get your staff team to sit around the window. People are more likely to walk in when people are already in.
89. **Put your best seating in the window** - so most people sit in the window - enjoying your coffee. It's a live advert to the street.
90. **Another tip for a quiet café** is to walk out, stand on the street and walk-in again. Weird psychology, but how many times do you have no customers and then three groups at once? Because people follow people. Again, try it.
91. **Constant rain can reduce customers** by 25% on an average day. It's perfectly normal - don't panic. Give the staff a free cake.
92. **Never let staff eat behind the counter.**
93. **No mobile phones whilst on duty** - nothing worse than waiting for service and seeing the staff on their phone.
94. **House rules?** If you have any specific rules; like no dogs, or no smoking (even outside) then just have some simple signs, so guests know. It's awkward for a guest to be told after they have done something 'wrong'. You may put them off coming back.
95. **Are walls clean?** Make sure the walls are cleaned as part of your usual cleaning routine - especially skirting boards.
96. **Keep your windows clean** - First Impressions count more than you know
97. **De-clutter.** Especially older cafes. After a while, stuff can find a home on surfaces. And then you stop noticing. De-clutter.
98. **Keep your toilet looking good.** Toilets matter a lot to some people. This can make or break their loyalty. Not just clean, but neat, fresh, flowers? Free Nappy? Wipes?
99. **Are all your lights working?** Don't let people sit in dim corners with broken lights. Worse still flickering lights.
100. **In the morning, do your staff know how to open up so it doesn't feel half-open?** Guests will be put off if they feel they shouldn't be there. Lights not on, music not on, cakes not out etc.
101. **Enjoy yourself.** It's Infectious.

HAVE YOU GOT ANY CAFÉ TIPS THAT YOU SWEAR BY?

TWEET US

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AND TELL US YOUR FAVOURITES.

Nick & Linda Castle started CLO Coffee in 2008 with one café on a high street. For over 10 years, they have operated a coffee roastery, 6 cafes, and a bookshop. Their cafes have run in different locations; city centre, shopping centre, out-of-town high street, offices district & they have run cafes in partnership with YMCA and Leeds City Council.

Discover more at CLOcoffee.com

Listen to Nick & Linda's podcast *Experience Good Coffee* for more tips and inspiration.

Search 'Experience Good Coffee Podcast' in your usual podcast player or visit CLOcoffee.com/podcast

