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In the know

VisitEngland's accommodation and visitor attraction assessors share their thoughts on how to impress your customers and keep them coming back

Tips for accommodation businesses

All hospitality businesses set out to impress their customers. As a professional guest, your assessor needs to be impressed in order to maximise your star-rating potential. We have asked the assessors to give us their top tips on how to maximise your offering from excellent housekeeping standards on arrival to the guests' departure and all points in between.

Housekeeping

First impressions are all important. Housekeeping starts outside. Are your parking areas tidy and free of weeds? Is the garden well tended and tidy? Don't forget that colour can be provided in the garden and pots all year round.

Within the first few steps of entering your property a guest should feel that it is clean, fresh-smelling and clutter-free. This might be the place for fresh flowers. Try not to use plug-in air fresheners.

Cleanliness is about attention to detail. The eye can sometimes travel further than the duster. Guests will notice dirty extractor fan covers, dusty skirting boards and tops of pictures – and so will your assessor.

In bedrooms, be aware of items such as the hospitality tray. Check to see if it's clean and do the same for the inside of the kettles and teapots. Take used items out of the room to be cleaned thoroughly through the dishwasher.

In a self-catering kitchen, do not forget the detail at every changeover. Is the fridge seal clean? Have the crumbs been emptied from the toaster? Are the cutlery trays spotlessly clean? These are the areas that your guests and assessor will be looking at.

Cleaning is a relentless task and it is easy to inadvertently neglect some areas – especially if you are employing staff, so ensure that they work to strict cleaning schedules. This ensures that mattress and pillow protectors are changed regularly and heavy items of furniture are frequently moved.

The key to excellent cleaning is to ensure that there is never any evidence of previous guests. If you accept pets, ensure that your cleaning regime removes all traces of them every time.

If some areas are difficult to clean such as marked grout or a bath seal, some maintenance will make the housekeeping job easier and improve the look of the room.

Housekeeping is not all about cleaning. The presentation of your property is just as important and is the role of the housekeeper:

- The bathroom is clean, but has it had that final polish to make it sparkle? Are the towels and toiletries presented in the best possible way?
- Is the hospitality tray fully stocked and well presented?
- Are the beds as well dressed as they can be, with well-laundered linen, plump pillows and perhaps some scatter cushions?
- In a self-catering kitchen, are the cupboards and drawers always tidy, with everything in its place? Some property owners put photographs on the inside of kitchen cupboard doors. This shows a guest what should be in the cupboard and encourages staff to have everything in the correct place with any breakages replaced. >



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> **Food and service**

Breakfast is the meal that is prepared by most service providers and is an important part of the visit for most guests. Improvements can be made to the breakfast offering in many ways, some of which are very simple and come at no extra cost.

If you are providing a breakfast buffet – hot or cold – give the food and presentation some thought. Make sure the buffet looks appealing to all guests and where there is heavy usage ensure that it is kept topped up and clean. Try to add colour and make it appealing. Perhaps have some foods at different heights. Good quality glass containers always look better than plastic. Freshly prepared fruit salad is more appetising and easier to eat than a bowl of fruit and it is not so easy for guests to add it to their picnic lunch. Try to provide more than one fruit juice. Keep items such as yoghurts cool, for example by putting them over ice.

If you are sourcing any of your food locally, then shout about it. For example, if your eggs come from the local farm or farm shop, add the information to your menus, both on your tables and the website.

Consider stocking and offering a range of teas and serve good quality freshly ground coffee.

It is not just about the quality of the main items served. Ensure that the quality of the breads and preserves is good.

One of the most asked questions of assessors is: "When should I serve the toast?" This is a question that we cannot really answer, as some people like it with their cooked meal and some after. Some like it hot and some like it cold. The best advice is to ask each customer and serve it accordingly.

Ideally, guests will select their cooked breakfast items at the time of the meal. If you are running a smaller B&B and decide to ask guests to order prior to the meal, then do it well.

- Only take pre-orders for cooked items
- Provide an extensive range of items
- Provide a good clear menu
- Make it clear what else is provided as part of the breakfast, but that orders are not required for these items.

Other meals

Fewer small serviced accommodation businesses serve dinner these days, but for some it remains an important part of the offering. This is certainly true of many inns. The assessor will have experienced many types and styles of food and service and is able to offer help and advice in a number of areas.

Casual dining is becoming more popular these days, so you don't always need to provide white linen and traditional service methods. Although dining styles might be casual and relaxed, service needs to be professional and timely. Spend time on staff training and menu knowledge. Upselling during a meal can benefit your business greatly, but it needs to be done well and at the right time.

Most guests would rather see a short menu with freshly prepared ingredients than be offered an extensive choice where food is cooked from frozen or is pre-prepared.

Hot food should be served on hot plates. It sounds simple, but it is not always the case.

General hints and tips

Try to sleep in your own bedrooms occasionally. You can then see more easily what works and what doesn't. For example, are the lights, power points and mirrors well positioned?

Develop a critical eye for detail and ask the same questions as your customers would about the room they are in. For example:

- Why are the light bulbs in the bedside lamps different?
- Why has that light shade been left looking damaged and tatty?
- Where do I store my luggage?
- Why are all of the surfaces filled and where do I put my things?

In this way you can make your rooms more user-friendly and appealing.

If money is tight, be sure to get the fundamental things right first. Invest in high-quality beds, either pocket sprung or memory foam, and good thermostatic showers. Guests will forgive older furniture and fittings more than they will an older and less supportive mattress.

Provide WIFI and easy access to it. More guests require it these days, either for business or leisure, so you are at a disadvantage without it.

Your website is your shop window. Spend as much time and effort on it as you do with the rest of your business. Your assessor will have used your website prior to arrival and will be able to offer help and advice about how to optimise it.

If you are providing bed and breakfast or self-catering, offer recommendations for local pubs and restaurants.

Don't forget...

Make good use of your assessor. They are there to help you and will be happy to answer any questions you might have about the assessment process.

Things might not go according to plan during your assessment visit, as it might not for any guest's visit. It is not the problem that is important, but how you handle it and recover the situation – that's what people will remember. >

“Make good use of your assessor. They are there to help you and will be happy to answer any questions”





> **Tips for visitor attractions**

- Make full use of your database and social media to keep potential customers up to date with developments such as births at zoos, plants that are in flower or special exhibitions
- Consider discounts for online bookings and loyalty bonus pricing
- Surprise your customers occasionally with a free ride or a behind-the-scenes tour
- Ensure that all staff are easily recognisable and are wearing easy-to-read name badges
- Provide site maps with your top tips and things not to miss
- Try to thank visitors as they leave and, if possible, provide incentives to return

Anticipate the needs of as many customers as possible:

- Provide clean drinking water for dogs
- Accept Euros, if possible
- Ensure that all accessible WCs are free from obstruction
- Ensure that all induction loops are working at all times

Food and drink represent valuable extra income

- Be sure that your customers know where the food and drink outlets are
- Display menus and any food offers clearly outside the food outlet
- Be inventive with the menu and try to tailor the dishes to your customer base

- Many customers will be looking for the 'healthy option', so build that into your menus and include children's meals in this
- Smaller portions are appreciated by some customers and offering this can help with your pricing policy by offering meals at different price points
- Train staff to maximise throughput by ensuring that tables are clean and ready for customers at all times and that customer service is efficient
- Don't close the food outlets too far ahead of closing time. Consider scaling down and perhaps only offering cold food towards the end of the day
- Make as much as you can of local and homemade produce

Retail

- Tailor your stock to suit the attraction and its main market
- Don't carry too much stock
- If a line is not selling, discount it in order to sell more of it. This will free up your retail space for a more profitable line
- Ensure that pricing within the shop is clear for customers to see. ■

“Make full use of your database and social media to keep customers up to date with developments”

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