

How to deal with pets in your shop

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At a coffee shop in a small mall a few weeks ago, I noticed that the waiters suddenly became agitated and animated by something that was happening outside. I immediately assumed that some crime had taken place and started preparing my family to crawl under the table, when we noticed that a man had walked past with a huge snake draped over his shoulders.



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What happens when a customer has brought in a pet dog, cat, monkey, lizard, hamster or even a snake into your store? As he nonchalantly walks around pretending that everything is perfectly normal, you notice that some customers find it all quite interesting and cute, but there is also a look of disapproval, disgust, or horror on the faces of some other customers. What can you do?

Disability

If the pet owner is somebody disabled, then perhaps you don't need to be worried about the so-called 'service animals'. In most cases, working dogs are incredibly well trained - they will never attack anyone and will certainly never mess your store with their toilet habits. These incredible dogs have been proven to stick with their owners, even through the most horrific events - like terrorist attacks. In any event, there are laws enshrined in our constitution that protect disabled people being allowed to bring in their pets, and you also don't want a PR disaster if you discriminate or refuse to allow a disabled person to bring his guide dog (or similar) into your business – no matter what your staff or customers think or want, but if the pet's owner has no visible disability – he is just a customer or a family member - with a 'comfort' pet either constrained by a leash, or running around freely - then the answer is not so obvious.

It seems to become more and more common today, and some customers have even claimed that their disability is an invisible physical, emotional or psychological problem like diabetes, hearing loss, depression, anxiety or even post-traumatic stress disorder. It's not just businesses that deal with food, what about doctors' rooms and other places of medical therapy, hospitals, movies, schools or playgrounds, office spaces, airplanes, hotels, and similar sensitive places?

Of course, it doesn't help that the media often reports on horrific attacks by animals on people that resulted in serious injury or even death. And it also doesn't help that many cultures and religions reject animals becoming too close to human beings, as with Muslim people and pigs.

Just to further confuse the situation, a lawyer who deals with disabled people told me that one isn't allowed to ask too many questions of a disabled person and his pet. Generally speaking, you are only allowed to ask two questions: Is that animal required because of a disability? and What training for a work or task has the animal received?

What happens when the fur starts to fly?

To complicate things further, what happens when the fur starts to fly? Bearing in mind that you can only ask those two questions, carefully observe the person's answer. A legitimate disabled person will probably give you a straightforward response; the animal's behaviour, health, grooming and appearance seems acceptable; and he may even offer notes from a medical professional and/or a competent organisation (like SA Blind Dogs Association,) that has trained the pet. The pet will be properly controlled with a leash, for example, and I have even seen a monkey with a nappy strapped around its waist.

On the other hand, if the animal runs around freely, makes a toilet mess, sniffs and licks other people, responds to the 'likes' and growls at the 'dislikes', or if customer trivialises the situation, gets impatient or aggressive with you, or if he is uncertain about his reply, there's a good chance that he is taking liberties with a favourite, albeit unnecessary, pet. Again, if he wants to make an issue from this by claiming you have offended him, (or insulted his pet), avoiding a PR nightmare or a social media disaster should encourage you to be sensitive, and to show empathy and flexibility on a case-by-case basis. Being hard line is probably not a good idea: you don't want to be seen as a bully.

What else can you do to avoid trouble?

- Your people need to be briefed and trained to deal with these situations. Consider discussing issues around disabilities, cultures and religions, and animals. Promote a better understanding of these and address their fears or beliefs. Train them to observe signs that are positive or negative about pets and their owners. Help them to deal with their own stress and/or views. Brief them about the laws of the land with respect to disabled people and pets, and avoiding litigation. And, most of all, ensure that they have the skills and confidence to deal with the polite interpersonal interaction. (Do it now, before a crisis hits your business – even if you risk losing a handful of stubborn customers!);
- Some decent signs outside your business, or communication with your customers, can also make a difference. Explain exactly what your policy and beliefs are. Use written communication and posters, your website, letters and emails, and special conversations if needed. Avoid being defensive, but rather be positive and reactive. (By the way, does your business actually have a policy and procedures in place?);
- In addition, you can also provide special facilities for pets, as many restaurants and business have been forced to do with anti-smoking legislation. If it is a regular event, then all the more reason to make it a priority. This is especially true when customers or your staff claim to have an allergy, or if their fear of animals is debilitating. Reasonable modifications like good protective floor and furniture coverings for easy cleaning, and proper ventilation are a start, but you can also provide special cleaning/hygiene facilities for people with sanitised towels and a disinfectant spray, for example. I have even seen one business with a separate entrance for pet lovers, and once the customer left, the

cleaners came in immediately to sanitise the waiting room. I've also heard of a supermarket that has 'pet-friendly hours' once a week at the end of the day when all other customers have left. (On the subject of allergies, it's quite hard to not get personal. For example, are you going to ban perfume, nuts, and cat hair on clothes because some of your customers are allergic?); and

- When something goes wrong, be prepared. If an animal bites another person, or is really badly behaved, treat the victim with a sense of urgency and respect, and impress other customers and staff with your ability to deal with these delicate situations. You may have to expel the customer and his pet firmly. Decide now who will deal with this, and what that person will do and say. Have the telephone numbers of security, police and the local SPCA easily available. Record exactly what happened, for later reference. (By the way, if the animal and/or owner are particularly unruly, you will find that other people support you completely, and there shouldn't be a backlash.)

These are not solutions that will help you avoid all problems, especially with pet lovers who don't respect other people, or who have issues with their egos, but they may help you to avoid most problems that may come up. And if all else fails, maybe it's time to get a really hungry crocodile to lie down outside your main entrance and help you get rid of those pesky cats!

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