

-POLITICS
-BUSINESS
-LIFESTYLE
-CULTURE

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STEPHANIE PHAIR [the president of the OUTNET]

LORD JACOB ROTHSCHILD [on philanthropy]

DONALD TRUMP [interview with the all american billionaire]

SIR NICHOLAS SOAMES MP [interview with winston churchill's grandson]

JON SNOW [interview with the anchor of channel 4 news]

WELCOME TO MONTE CARLO [feature on the principality of monaco]



We Need to Rediscover the Art of Hospitality

By Mark Easton, Home Editor at BBC News

The phrases 'corporate hospitality' and 'hospitality industry' make me uncomfortable. They seem to come from the dictionary of double-speak, loaded with contradiction that threatens to pervert our civil society.

Hospitality must never be commercial or industrial – quite the reverse. It is generous and intimate: present in the sincerity of a smile, the twinkle of an eye or the gentle touch of a helping hand. I fear we are in danger of forgetting what hospitality is really about.

The word itself was corrupted long ago, its meaning stripped of warmth and humanity by accountants and lawyers. It has become today that most joyless of things, a technical term employed by the taxman in formal edicts on allowable deductions.

"Hospitality provided because it would be polite, because it is expected, or because it would improve relationships is not for strict business purposes," VAT Notice 700/65 drily states. But if it is none of those things, is it hospitality at all?

'Friendliness to guests' is how hospitality is usually defined, but let us dig down to its roots, because an important truth lies buried there. Hospitality comes from the Latin word 'hospes', which translates as both 'host' and 'guest', sometimes it is used to mean 'stranger'. There is no contradiction here, however.

Hospitality essentially describes a fundamental building block of civil society – the foundation of social norms which dictates how natives should behave towards outsiders and, just as importantly, how outsiders should behave towards the natives. What is striking is that, down the ages and across cultures, peoples have developed remarkably similar narratives to describe and define these duties.

To the ancient Greeks it was Xenia, the reciprocal relationship of generosity and courtesy between host and guest. The former must offer a weary stranger food, drink, a bath and a bed. The latter must show respect and not be a burden. The great god Zeus was patron of hospitality and guests, always ready with a thunderbolt to avenge any wrong done.

Similarly, ancient Indian custom dictates that guests are forms of god and that hosts must treat them with the reverence and sacrifice afforded to a deity. Indeed, fables and parables from around the world tell similar tales of some hospitable inn-keeper offering

comfort to exhausted strangers who then often turn out to be a god or magical creature in disguise. It is, of course, a scene acted out in countless nativity plays each Christmas.

Within Judaism, Abraham is portrayed as the paragon of hospitality, generous and caring. Early Jewish scholars stressed that his example demonstrated it was not enough simply for a host to provide travellers with food and lodging but it must be done graciously, to "greet each person with a cheerful facial expression".

Celtic cultures have also won a reputation for the warmth of their welcome. Traditionally, hosts provide guests with the very best they have – the finest food and drink and the largest bed available. There is also an expectation that they will offer entertainment. Guests, in return, must make an offering to the hearth (ty teallach) of bread or wine and they, too, are often expected to sing a song, play a tune or tell a tale.

Hospitality is not the same as service. A service you may well pay for but hospitality must be offered freely, without the expectation of personal reward. That said, of course, hospitality is valuable, and smart entrepreneurs know it can have a big impact on the bottom line.

The USP of the ubiquitous Irish pub, exported around the planet, is the craic, a word (and spelling) invented in the late 20th century, but implying an association with the Celtic hospitality of the hearth. It may have more to do with modern marketing than ancient history, but it is a successful global brand because it makes customers feel they are being given something authentic: personal warmth, good fun and generosity of spirit (even if you have to pay over the odds for your pint of the black stuff).

I remember, at the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, reporting from the market town of Enniskillen on a grim November day that had seen 11 people killed by a bomb. After a draining and dispiriting shift, I arrived at my small hotel. I was that weary stranger of folklore and my inn-keeper host treated me like a long-lost brother. Despite the tragedy that had befallen the community, I experienced a remarkable warmth and understanding towards me, the outsider.

We shared whiskey and song. It was an evening I shall never forget – restoring my faith in human nature and instilling a love for the Irish people and their embrace of life and friendship.

"We are blessed with a moderate climate, unparalleled beauty of the landscape, uncluttered roads, and a God given will and desire to complete the task as most affable hosts." The words of Sir William Hastings, himself an affable host but also a man who has made 'Irish Hospitality' a key part of his business plan. He heads a family-run luxury hotel business in Northern Ireland, knighted by the Queen for 'services to hospitality'.

"First impressions are very, very important," he tells me. "Only a few have the exceptional skills required." Competing with the big international chains, Sir William knows it is in the personal touches that they can score.

"I have seen people who have that special quality in customer service but in every other respect they are a dead loss," Sir William confides. The best hoteliers recognise that those rare individuals who can make a guest feel truly valued are worth their weight in gold. "Because they are exceptional, they get away with it!" His daughter Julie describes herself as the Hastings scout – always on the lookout for the individual with that rare talent to charm the most demanding of customers. "You can only teach so much," Julie says, explaining how the company runs the Hastings Hospitality programme for potential recruits. "We can help them learn how to deal with complaints, for example, but you cannot instil common sense or change someone's personality."

Great hosts are born, not made. The finest are in huge demand with top hotels trying to poach the best staff – concierges and receptionists pursued almost like top footballers. And the reason is obvious – the right faces greeting guests can transform a hotel's appeal.

"I want my colleagues to establish an emotional bond with our guests," German hotelier Carsten Rath says. I met him shortly after he had opened an exclusive new hotel in Switzerland, the Kameha Grand Zurich. "Empathy is key, but one needs to have certain base – be it in the DNA or in the upbringing so that training does not fall on stony ground. I work very hard to find, recruit and retain the very best people – kind people at heart."

Mark Easton is Home Editor at BBC News