



# MARKETING MATTERS

*This month Angie Petkovic gets to grips with the disgruntled guest and how hoteliers should deal with genuine and fraudulent complaints*

**Q** From a background in the catering sector, I made the move to become an independent hotelier just a couple of years ago but as much as I am finding it satisfying, I have endured a catalogue of incidents where several guests have quibbled about paying their full bill blaming me for a whole variety of reasons that are either out of my control or could not have been anticipated. Am I being ripped off, or am I just not experienced enough to deal with these scenarios?

**A** To be blunt, it's likely that you are being ripped off in some cases and, yes, I think your lack of experience is partly the reason. I think we are becoming a nation of complainers and all the compensation programmes and companies make everyone believe that someone should 'make a claim'. At some point this has got to stop but don't get me on my soapbox about this as I really won't stop!

First and foremost you need to identify yourself what is and isn't acceptable, work out the ground rules and then make sure all the staff are aware. You do not have to do anything you don't want to and you do not have to always accept that you are in the wrong.

When I got my first wet bed in my hotel I was mortified and so very embarrassed for the person. I wrongly made the assumption that they couldn't have known. There are two types of bedwetters, the first being the genuine accident. When this happens they will be embarrassed but will take responsibility and alert you by probably stripping the bed, offering to replace the mattress and anything else to sort it out. Then there is the regular one; they know about it and these split into two types. Firstly, those who take precautions and sort it so you will never know and secondly those who deny it and hope that the proprietor is too embarrassed to say anything about it. In all cases you will never see them again, so it's vital that you

deal with it. A wet bed cannot be used again and although it's not a frequent event, it does need a policy.

The same applies for all types of complaints or scenarios but because your letter doesn't list them I will cover off a few:

- **Destruction of your property** – you charge and pursue them.
- **Animal accidents** – if you allow animals you should have a clearly defined policy of what's acceptable.
- **Complaints about meals in the restaurant or bar** – make sure you have a clear policy with your staff to observe what is going on at all times. If a meal goes back to the kitchen barely touched then there is a good chance that there is something wrong, or perhaps the guest made the wrong choice and doesn't want to pay for it. It's important to check as the plates are being cleared. Being aware of how clear the plates are will help you decide whether someone is entitled to a reduction off the bill.

The worst that happened to me was a guest actually brought two caterpillars into the hotel with him. He ate the starter bar one leaf with a caterpillar on it and then complained. He then suddenly found another caterpillar on the garnish for the main course when all but the potato had been eaten! Luckily one of my team was keeping an eye on things and spotted him taking it out of a box to put it on the garnish. The staff member alerted me, so



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thankfully and satisfyingly, we were then able to describe the box in his pocket. You couldn't make it up!

Allergies are another common card that is sometimes falsely played. The guest makes a complaint at the end of the stay, or meal, and claims that they are allergic to something. I recommend having a policy in place that clearly states that you are able to cater in advance for dietary and allergy requirements if you are made aware of them, but will not take responsibility if not.

It is a shame that hoteliers like yourself get caught up in blaming themselves, yet you are quite right to be on your guard, having policies and actions in place for identifying those crying wolf just to save a few pennies. Reputation is still king and hoteliers must protect it as much as they can to meet guest expectations, while not pandering to the ever-increasing army of devious complainers.

*If you have a scenario or dilemma you would like Angie to look at for possible inclusion in Hotel Owner, please email [angie@aptmarketing.co.uk](mailto:angie@aptmarketing.co.uk) (Hotel Owner or Angie cannot reply individually to everyone but we welcome your stories).*

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