

Dealing With Difficult Guests: Strategies for Hospitality Professionals – Complete Hospitality Training

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Details:

Most difficult guests are not difficult people, and the first job is to work out which of three situations you are in, because they call for different responses. A dissatisfied guest is a service problem you can solve at the table. A disrespectful, aggressive or abusive guest is a safety problem with a documented procedure attached. An intoxicated guest is a legal problem under the venue licence, and treating any of the three as one of the others makes it worse.

There is nationally recognised training behind all three, and knowing which unit covers which situation is the fastest way to work out what your own procedure should say.

Situation	The unit that covers it	Where it sits
Dissatisfied guest, service failure	SITXCCS014 Provide service to customers , element 4	Core in both Certificate III in Hospitality qualifications
Disrespectful, aggressive or abusive customer	SIRXCEG008 Manage disrespectful, aggressive or abusive customers	An elective in SIT30722 Certificate III in Hospitality (Restaurant Front of House). A retail-package unit
Complex or escalated complaint or dispute	SITXCOM010 Manage conflict	Core in SIT40422 Certificate IV in Hospitality and SIT50422 Diploma of Hospitality Management
Recovering a service failure and keeping the guest	SITXCCS015 Enhance customer service experiences	The senior frontline unit. Also in the SITSS00077 Customer Service Management skill set
Intoxicated patron	SITHFAB021 Provide responsible service of alcohol	Core in SIT30722; elective in SIT30622. Required before you serve. Also available as the standalone SITSS00071 Responsible service of alcohol skill set

All five of those unit codes are current on our scope as RTO 3722, at extent Deliver and assess , with an end date of 30 June 2032 .

Start with the person, then review the pattern

Our original service guide begins with active listening, a calm tone and empathy. Let a dissatisfied guest explain the problem without interruption; check your understanding before offering a practical next step. Keep professional distance if the conversation feels personal. A positive manner can help, but it is never a reason to ignore threats, harassment or intoxication. The different safety and legal

responses are set out below.

Complaints also arrive as reviews or social posts. Acknowledge the issue without publishing another guest's details or an employee's private information, move the specifics to an appropriate channel, and investigate before promising a remedy. Record recurring causes and use them to improve training or service. A well-handled complaint may help rebuild trust, but guest loyalty is an outcome to earn, not something a script guarantees.

Tell the situations apart before you respond

Signal	Dissatisfied guest	Intoxicated or abusive guest
What they want	A specific outcome, the right dish, a refund, an apology	Often nothing specific, or another drink
Response to a fix	Settles once the problem is addressed	Escalates, repeats, or is forgotten
Physical signs	Not relevant	Slurred speech, unsteadiness, spilling drinks
Who owns it	The service team	The duty manager, under the venue licence
Correct end state	The guest stays and is looked after	Service stops

De-escalation on a service failure

Let them finish. Interrupting to correct a detail restarts the complaint from the top.

Acknowledge the specific thing, not the feeling. "The main came out fifteen minutes after the entree" works as an acknowledgement; "I am sorry you feel that way" does not.

Say what you will do and by when, then do it. Most anger at a counter is about not knowing what happens next.

Reduce the audience and lower your own pace and volume, because people tend to match them. Do not promise past your authority; bring the manager in rather than offering something that gets reversed in front of the guest.

The core unit sets this out as five performance criteria, and two of them are the ones venues most often get wrong. Criterion 4.1 requires you to proactively recognise customer dissatisfaction and take swift action to avoid escalation to a complaint, which means the skill is applied before anyone complains. Criterion 4.3 requires you to identify solutions in consultation with the customer rather than deciding the remedy and announcing it. Criterion 4.4 limits you to resolving within your own level of responsibility and organisational policy, and 4.5 requires escalation of complex service issues. So the venue has to define where your authority ends, or nobody can comply.

How much complaint handling SITXCCS014 actually assesses

The volume is specified, and it is a useful benchmark for in-house training that usually runs on a single role-play. To be assessed competent a candidate must:

Identify requirements and provide quality service to three different internal customers and three different external customers

Apply procedures to respond to and resolve three different customer complaints

Use effective communication techniques with at least one customer with special needs

Provide service in line with organisational standards and within designated response times

Seek both formal and informal feedback from customers on service quality

The "internal customer" half is the part venues skip. Half the assessed volume is about how you handle the kitchen, the bar and the next shift, not the guest.

The unit's knowledge requirements name the supporting detail: principles of quality customer service and positive communication; appropriate non-verbal communication, listed as body language, cultural customs, dress, gestures and voice tonality; designated response times for acknowledging customers ; awareness of special needs and cultural practices of various customer groups; and methods of collecting formal and informal feedback. Assessment must happen in an operational business environment where customers are served, either an industry workplace or a simulated industry environment set up for the purpose.

When the behaviour is the problem: what SIRXCEG008 actually requires

This is the unit written specifically for hostile customers, and it is worth reading even if you never enrol in it, because it is the clearest available template for a venue procedure. It has five elements, and the fifth is the one almost no in-house training includes.

1. Identify potentially disruptive customers

Monitor customer behaviour to identify signs of potential disruption. Use questioning and active listening to identify possible causes. Indicate willingness to assist in resolution. Refer to organisational policies, procedures and signage where applicable to explain the process to the customer.

Signage is in the unit for a reason. A rule the guest can see is far easier to enforce than a rule they hear for the first time from you.

2. Implement actions to defuse and de-escalate

Recognise emotional contagions and their impact. Maintain a calm, respectful and polite manner. Provide explanation, assistance or alternatives to address the cause. Display and maintain empathy to demonstrate understanding of the situation and its impact.

"Emotional contagion" is the technical name for the thing every experienced staff member has felt: the escalation spreading to you, then to the next table. Naming it is what makes it manageable.

3. Manage the customer

Use appropriate strategies for the behaviour. Identify customers who should be refused service or ejected, and action that professionally. Promptly identify and act on situations that pose a threat to the safety of self, others or property . Terminate the conversation or encounter if resolution is not possible. Refer situations beyond your own role to a supervisor or other relevant parties.

The explicit permission to end the encounter matters. Staff will keep absorbing abuse if nobody has told them they are allowed to stop.

4. Document and report the incident

Comprehensively document the incident according to organisational policy. Obtain statements and contact details from witnesses where appropriate. Report to the supervisor. Identify alternative approaches for affected staff and the organisation to avoid or mitigate similar incidents.

The record matters twice. It shows patterns in a person or a shift, and it is the evidence if the licence is ever questioned.

5. Manage the personal impacts

This element exists because abuse has a cost that does not end with the shift. It requires self-reflection to identify the physical, mental and emotional impacts of the incident on yourself, de-briefing with a supervisor after the incident, appropriate techniques to respond to those impacts, recognising signs of mental and emotional impact that require professional counselling and seeking appropriate support, and further self-reflection to identify personal response strategies to protect your own wellbeing in future.

If your venue's incident procedure ends at "write it up", it is missing an entire assessed element of the relevant unit.

The unit's foundation skills add the practical detail: reading policies and procedures, writing comprehensive incident reports, oral communication to explain policy and build rapport to defuse, problem solving to interpret the issue and offer alternatives, teamwork to engage more appropriate members of the team, and self-management to identify impacts on your own confidence and wellbeing and act to restore good health.

One honest caveat: SIRXCEG008 comes from the retail services training package, and the unit descriptor frames it around retail environments with high levels of customer contact. It is a hospitality elective rather than a hospitality core unit. The behaviours transfer well; the framing is retail.

Escalated disputes are a supervisory unit

Where the matter is bigger than a single interaction, the relevant unit is SITXCOM010 Manage conflict, which is core in the Certificate IV in Hospitality and the Diploma of Hospitality Management, and is aimed at senior operational personnel, supervisors and managers operating with some independence and using discretion and judgement. It has no prerequisites.

Its named techniques are worth having on a wall somewhere: assertiveness, meaning standing firm on organisational policy while remaining respectful; negotiation; appropriate communication; acknowledging all parties so each can express their views; sensitive and respectful responses with courtesy, discretion and cultural awareness; and minimising the broader impact on other colleagues and customers.

It also requires something the floor-level units do not: identifying and evaluating the impacts of conflict on business reputation and legal liability, then evaluating options against organisational policy and constraints, implementing the solution and completing the required reports. That is the supervisory job, and it is the reason escalation should go to someone trained for it rather than to whoever is nearest.

The eight customer matters SITXCOM010 names

The unit does not leave "escalated dispute" undefined. To be assessed competent a candidate must take action to resolve escalated complaints or disputes with customers in relation to at least three of these eight matters:

#	Matter
1	Cultural misunderstanding

2	Incorrect pricing of a product or service
3	Delays or errors in providing a product or service
4	Misunderstanding of a customer request, or a communication barrier
5	A person who appears to be violent or threatening
6	A problem or fault with a product or service
7	Refused entry, or ejection from the premises
8	A situation where someone has been or may be hurt

Read that list as a checklist for your own procedure. A venue incident policy that covers the product fault and the pricing error but says nothing about refused entry or someone being hurt is missing matters the national unit treats as core to the job.

Conflict between staff is assessed too

The same unit requires action to resolve team member disputes in relation to at least two of these four matters : a dispute or argument among work colleagues; a drug or alcohol-affected person; job duties or rosters; and lack of competence.

That is the answer to a question venues rarely ask out loud. The nationally recognised conflict unit treats an argument between two staff on a Friday night, and a colleague who turns up affected, as the same category of skill as an escalated guest dispute. Skills must be demonstrated in an operational business environment, industry or simulated, with access to current commercial policies and procedures for complaint, conflict and dispute resolution, and to customers and colleagues the candidate can actually interact with.

Service recovery: turning the complaint into the reason they come back

SITXCCS015 Enhance customer service experiences is the unit that treats a complaint as an opportunity rather than a loss. It applies to people who deal directly with customers daily and operate independently or with limited guidance, including senior frontline sales personnel, supervisors and managers. Its complaint work requires you to use questioning techniques to establish the nature and cause, assess the impact of the complaint on the customer, take responsibility for resolving it professionally, determine optimal solutions while taking organisational constraints into account, and turn complaints into opportunities to demonstrate high quality customer service .

Its foundation skills include one that is unusually specific and unusually useful: problem-solving skills to determine adequate and appropriate compensation for service difficulties . The unit expects someone to have thought about what a fair remedy looks like before the moment arrives, which is exactly the gap that produces inconsistent comps at the till.

If you want the whole difficult-guest problem covered by one credential rather than three, the SITSS00077 Customer Service Management skill set is the closest fit on our scope. It contains three units and no others:

Unit	Title
SITXCCS015	Enhance customer service experiences

SITXCCS016	Develop and manage quality customer service practices
SITXCOM010	Manage conflict

It is aimed at tourism, travel and hospitality personnel who already have frontline customer service skills and now need customer service management skills. In other words it assumes SITXCCS014 and builds the complaint, conflict and policy layer on top. See courses to confirm what is currently scheduled.

Where it stops being service and becomes law

Refusing service to a person who is unduly intoxicated is not a judgement call about hospitality. It is a legal duty under state liquor law, and it sits on the individual serving as well as on the licensee, so penalties can attach to you personally. Responsible Service of Alcohol training is where that duty is taught, and it is required before you serve.

RSA is one unit, SITHFAB021 , but it is regulated separately by eight jurisdictions, and the differences are real:

Jurisdiction	The position
Victoria	Use a current Victorian RSA certificate. Eligible interstate holders can apply for free bridging: approved original training within three years, with the online-course residence condition. Specific exemptions apply at qualifying producer events. Victorian RSA Refresher every three years.
New South Wales	Eligible temporary interstate workers can use approved interstate RSA. Permanent movers and security or RSA marshal roles must meet NSW training and competency-card requirements; eligible holders can use bridging instead of the full NSW RSA course. NSW competency card: five years. Interstate concessions have separate eligibility and certificate-age requirements.
South Australia	Check provider approval and training date. Training from 1 November 2020 must be through a Commissioner-approved RTO. Earlier RSA training need not be repeated solely because of that approval change. No routine RSA renewal period stated in the cited CBS guidance; check applicable licence conditions.
Queensland	Accepted where the evidence is a Statement of Attainment for the nationally accredited Provide Responsible Service of Alcohol course. An attendance certificate is insufficient. Valid RSA training generally has no expiry; training completed before 2002 must be replaced.
Western Australia	Provide the RSA certificate showing completion of the nationally accredited course. An interstate RSA card alone is not accepted as evidence. Keep the

	RSA certificate as training evidence; approved-manager cards have separate renewal requirements.
Northern Territory	Certificates from an RTO registered to deliver RSA are accepted, including interstate certificates. Check certificate age and the NT refresher requirements. NT guidance gives a three-year limit for interstate certificates and directs holders to a refresher; check current renewal guidance.
Australian Capital Territory	Valid interstate RSA certificates are recognised, subject to the ACT's three-year currency limit and ACT-approved refresher requirements. Three years from course completion, then an ACT-approved refresher.
Tasmania	Interstate certificates can be accepted under the Commissioner's conditions. Requirements differ for employees and liquor licence holders; check the appropriate role. No RSA expiry date in the regulator's FAQ; an employer may request updated training.

Current regulator guidance: NSW , VIC , SA , QLD , WA , NT , ACT , TAS .

See RSA and managing intoxicated patrons . If you are checking a provider's claims before paying, beware of RSA training course scams sets out what to look for, and how long does an RSA last covers currency by state.

Refusal is easier the earlier it happens. Slowing service, offering water and food, and stopping at the point of doubt avoids the confrontation of cutting someone off four drinks later.

One currency point worth checking on yourself rather than only on new starters: in Victoria the three-yearly refresher attaches to the certificate , not to a licence. A floor staff member who has never held a licence and completed RSA four years ago is not current, and refusing service is precisely the duty they are relying on that certificate to discharge.

When it becomes a work health and safety matter

Aggression directed at staff is a workplace hazard, not part of the job, and the WHS units treat it that way.

SITXWHS005 Participate in safe work practices is core in both Certificate III qualifications and applies to all personnel at all levels . It requires you to promptly report unsafe work practices, issues and breaches of health, safety and security procedures, to identify and remove hazards from your immediate area and report all hazards as they arise, to recognise emergency and potential emergency situations and follow organisational security and emergency procedures, to seek assistance from colleagues or authorities, and to complete emergency incident reports accurately . Security issues in the unit's own list include managing cash, documents, equipment, keys and people safely.

SITXWHS007 Implement and monitor work health and safety practices is the supervisory counterpart, core in the Certificate IV and the Diploma. It requires coordinating scheduled hazard identification activities, reacting to reports of hazards by other workers, coordinating and participating in risk assessments, implementing control measures or referring them upward, monitoring the effectiveness of controls and promptly identifying inadequacies , coordinating the resulting training, and maintaining records and reports accurately and legibly as reliable and timely input into management.

A venue procedure should therefore state who is authorised to refuse service, when security or police are called, that nobody is expected to physically intervene, how the incident is written down, who debriefs the staff member afterwards, and how the pattern gets reviewed. Getting a whole team to respond the same way is why this is usually handled through workplace training rather than a briefing. See also health and safety best practice in hospitality.

About us

We are Complete Hospitality Training, RTO 3722, CRICOS 04242E. Level 3, 28 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne VIC 3000, and 410 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010. Contact melbourne@cht.edu.au or +61 3 9654 1554.

We link to the relevant course and regulatory sources in this guide. Check those sources for current requirements, and confirm course availability, delivery, fees and entry requirements with us before enrolling.

Source records and further guidance

We link the unit records and regulator guidance relevant to this page below. Check the current source before making an enrolment, licensing or employment decision.

SIRXCEG008 Manage disrespectful, aggressive or abusive customers

SITXCOM010 Manage conflict

SITXCCS014 Provide service to customers

SITSS00077 Customer Service Management

SITXCCS015 Enhance customer service experiences

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Victoria)

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Queensland)

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Western Australia)

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (South Australia)

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Tasmania)

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Northern Territory)

Responsible Service of Alcohol training requirements (Australian Capital Territory)

Can we refuse service to someone who is sober but abusive?

Yes. Behaviour is grounds for refusal of entry or service independently of alcohol, and SIRXCEG008 element 3 expressly requires identifying customers who should be refused service or ejected and actioning that professionally. Follow the venue policy and any licence conditions.

Does the refusal have to come from a manager?

The legal duty for intoxication sits on whoever serves, but most venues route refusals through the duty manager so decisions stay consistent. The unit requires referral of situations beyond your own role either way.

Am I allowed to walk away from an abusive customer?

Yes. SIRXCEG008 criterion 3.4 requires you to terminate the conversation or encounter if resolution is not possible. It is in the unit, not a matter of individual discretion.

How many complaints does a candidate have to resolve to pass SITXCCS014?

Three, and they must be three different customer complaints. The same unit also requires quality service to three different internal and three different external customers, and effective communication with at least one customer with special needs.

How many escalated disputes does SITXCOM010 require?

At least three, drawn from a list of eight named matters: cultural misunderstanding, incorrect pricing, delays or errors, misunderstanding or communication barrier, a person who appears violent or threatening, a product or service fault, refused entry or ejection, and a situation where someone has been or may be hurt.

Does the conflict unit cover disputes between staff as well as with guests?

Yes. It separately requires action on at least two of four team member matters: a dispute among colleagues, a drug or alcohol-affected person, job duties or rosters, and lack of competence.

Can conflict skills be assessed in a classroom?

They must be demonstrated in an operational business environment, but that can be a simulated industry environment set up for assessment rather than a live venue. The assessor must have access to real commercial complaint, conflict and dispute resolution procedures either way.

What is "emotional contagion"?

The spread of an emotional state from one person to others. Recognising it and its impact is criterion 2.1 of SIRXCEG008. In practice it is why one escalating table can change the temperature of a whole room, including the staff.

Should the venue collect witness details after an incident?

Where appropriate, yes. Obtaining statements and contact details from witnesses is criterion 4.2 of SIRXCEG008.

Does anyone have to check on the staff member afterwards?

Under SIRXCEG008 element 5, yes. It requires de-briefing with a supervisor following the incident, and recognising signs of mental and emotional impact that require professional counselling and seeking appropriate support. Most in-house procedures stop before this point.

Should resolved complaints still be logged?

Yes. One resolved complaint is noise; the same complaint four times is a fixable cause. Criterion 5.2 of SITXCCS014 requires identifying recurring complaints and feeding them back internally.

Is there a single short credential that covers complaints and conflict?

The SITSS00077 Customer Service Management skill set is the closest. It contains exactly three units: SITXCCS015 Enhance customer service experiences, SITXCCS016 Develop and manage quality customer service practices, and SITXCOM010 Manage conflict. It assumes you already have frontline service skills.

Is my RSA valid in another state?

An RSA Statement of Attainment is a national training record, but permission to serve alcohol depends on the destination's rules. NSW permits eligible temporary interstate workers; permanent movers and security or RSA marshal roles must meet NSW training and competency-card requirements, using bridging where eligible. Victoria offers bridging to eligible interstate holders. SA applies approved-provider rules to training from 1 November 2020, with earlier training not required to be repeated solely for that change. QLD and WA require suitable national RSA evidence. Tasmania distinguishes staff from licence holders; the ACT and NT have local currency and refresher requirements. Check the regulator before your first shift. See RSA recognition by jurisdiction ([/rsa/](#)), NSW's rules (<https://www.nsw.gov.au/business-and-economy/liquor-and-gaming/training/rsa-bridging>) and SA's rules (<https://www.cbs.sa.gov.au/sections/LGL/RSA-approved-providers>).

Does my RSA expire?

That also depends. Queensland and Western Australia impose no expiry. The Northern Territory and the ACT expire at three years. In Victoria, the free RSA Refresher must be completed every 3 years to keep the certificate current, and that applies to anyone holding a Victorian RSA certificate — not only to licence holders. Licensees carry a separate three-yearly obligation under s 108AA of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998; the two are different rules.

I am floor staff, not a licensee. Does the Victorian three-yearly refresher apply to me?

Yes. Victorian RSA certificate holders must complete the free RSA Refresher every three years to keep their certificate current. The same course provides a bridging pathway for eligible interstate holders. In Victoria, an interstate RSA certificate generally cannot be used on its own. Eligible holders can apply for the free RSA Refresher bridging course to obtain a Victorian certificate. LCV requires approved original RSA training completed within the last three years and, for an online course, residence interstate or overseas at the time. Allow about ten working days for the application. LCV lists a specific exemption for interstate liquor producers at qualifying temporary or major events. Check the Victorian eligibility and event rules (<https://www.vic.gov.au/rsa-training>) before relying on a certificate.

Is the Victorian RSA just the unit?

No, and this is the most commonly missed point. Victoria requires a Liquor Control Victoria approved provider and a second stage after the unit: the LCV Learning Hub pre-training survey, the SHARPR module and a post-training survey. Until those are complete the RSA certificate does not exist.

A provider says its course is "OLGR-approved" or "DLGSC-approved". Is that reassuring?

No. Queensland and Western Australia do not operate an approved-provider register for RSA, so those phrases describe a scheme that does not exist. Treat them as a warning sign.

What training covers conflict as opposed to abuse?

SITXCOM010 Manage conflict, core in the Certificate IV in Hospitality and the Diploma of Hospitality Management, for complex or escalated complaints and disputes. SIRXCEG008 is the unit for disrespectful, aggressive or abusive behaviour. They are not the same thing.

Which qualification should a venue train front-of-house staff in for this?

SIT30722 Certificate III in Hospitality (Restaurant Front of House) carries RSA as a core unit and SIRXCEG008 among its electives, which is the closest match. For something shorter, our scope also carries the SITSS00071 Responsible service of alcohol and SITSS00070 Hospitality Compliance skill sets. See courses (/courses/) and the restaurant waiting course (/courses/restaurant-waiting/). Confirm current fees and intakes with us directly.