

UH students practice 5-star service for Super Bowl LI guests

By Katherine Blunt | November 17, 2016 | Updated: November 21, 2016 9:16am



Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Staff

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University of Houston students participate in a team-building challenge as part of a hospitality training session Friday in preparation for the Super Bowl coming to NRG Stadium in February.

The question required careful thought: Can a concierge say "Howdy" to a Super Bowl big shot?

Evan Dunbar, a first-year graduate student at the University of Houston, waffled before deciding that the old Texas greeting has a place in the luxury lexicon.

"I think it would be a little infectious," he said. "But y'all is not acceptable."

The question was one of several posed to nearly 25 students preparing to escort VIPs during their time in Houston for Super Bowl LI. They contemplated matters of etiquette and judgment at the Houstonian Hotel last week as Jeff Wielgopalan, a hospitality industry executive, described the fundamentals of standout service.

A former hotel inspector, he recalled a time when he had to change rooms and found his belongings, from the shirts in his closets to the book on his night stand, placed exactly as he had left them.

"The underlying theme is, someone is just paying attention to you," said Wielgopalan, vice president of learning and development for the Forbes Travel Guide.

The students, enrolled in a two-year course jointly offered by UH's sports administration and hotel and hospitality management departments, are in the final weeks of high-end service training in preparation to guide esteemed guests through the city during the 10-day lead-up to the game, which will be played at NRG Stadium on Feb. 5. For weeks, they have been studying the behind-the-scenes efforts needed to execute one of the most highly anticipated events in the world.

"We sell an experience, an intangible good," said David Walsh, an assistant professor in UH's department of health and human performance. "You walk away with memories."

A step ahead of guests

During the most recent lesson, Wielgopalan reminded the students that impressions are made in a matter of seconds, leaving little room for error.

"Make sure you know how to have a conversation with someone," he said. "It's actually a dying art."

It starts with the introduction. If a guest extends a hand and offers his or her name and occupation, respond with the same pieces of information.

Then comes the conversation, and words matter. Wielgopalan challenged the students to cleanse their sentences of verbal tics like "uh" and "um," as well as colloquialisms such as "no problem" and "you guys."

But the real secret, he said, is the effort to remain a step ahead of the guests with anticipatory questions or gestures. If they ask where to mail a postcard, respond with directions, a pen and a stamp. If they're in need of a coffee at 6 a.m., ask whether they would prefer a cup from a chain or a local cafe.

"This is the hallmark of really great service," he said.

The aspiring professionals are among hundreds within the retail and service industries polishing their skills in advance of the game. Nearly 140,000 visitors are expected to swarm hotels, restaurants and storefronts during game week, according to a report prepared for the city's Super Bowl Host Committee.

"We want to make sure people understand that this is a vibrant place to live, work and play," said Ric Campo, the committee's chairman.

The city's dining hot spots are bracing for an influx of patrons, said Jonathan Horowitz, president of Greater Houston Restaurant Association and CEO of Legacy Restaurants. Those that host events or offer private dining already are booking events and reviewing operations.

"It's really just being prepared in terms of having labor in place and making sure you don't run out of staff," he said.

Businesses to 'feel the impact'

Much of the activity, estimated to bring a \$350 million economic boost to greater Houston, will be concentrated downtown, where NFL Live, a 10-day fan festival, will be held at Discovery Green. A \$175 million renovation of the George R. Brown Convention Center, now underway, will add five new restaurants along Avenida de las Americas, a revamped pedestrian plaza and several public art displays.

"It's about changing the way we interact with this space and making it something of a hub for locals and tourists," said A.J. Minstretta, director of public relations for Visit Houston.

The Uptown District, where many NFL team owners and other high-ranking visitors are expected to stay, is bracing for a surge of activity around the Galleria, which will be accessible from downtown by bus and shuttle. Bob Ethington, the district's director of research & economic development, said the area's 8,000 hotel rooms are booked.

"We've got a great presence of NFL people," he said. "The Galleria is going to be an incredible draw, but the other retailers in the area are also going to feel the impact."

The Houstonian, one of the city's premier hotels, sold out within the last month. Steve Fronterhouse, hotel general manager, said the staff has been preparing for the event for about a year and now meets monthly to perfect its plans for the guests' arrival.

"We feel it is important for us to make a great impression on our guests and the (NFL team) owners," he said, adding that the city's collective efforts could help propel Houston to the top of the list to host national events.

Southern hospitality

As part of the lesson at the hotel last week, Dunbar learned he was one for two on "howdy" and "y'all." Used sparingly, the southern contraction could work when addressing the rich and famous, Wielgopalan said.

"It's appropriate in this place," he said. "But if you start to sound like a caricature of yourself, you're getting into not-well-spoken territory."

Fronterhouse added privately that he greets his guests with a "Howdy" every now and then.

"In my opinion, southern hospitality is what it's all about," he said.

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