

How to Tip With More Confidence

By Jesse Will

Perhaps you've stumbled into this scenario: At an airport, scrambling to buy a snack and a bottle of water before a flight, you find the checkout kiosk and tap your card. The machine asks if you'd like to add a tip. But . . . for whom? The employee in the corner hanging bags of Cheez-Its?

Or maybe you've had this experience: You're at a trendy restaurant where you go to a counter to order food that will be brought to your table—after you collect your own silverware. When you're asked to pay, the counter person spins a screen to reveal tip increments of 20, 25, and 30 percent . . . for service on food and drinks you haven't even received yet.

Welcome to the new normal in tipping: being put on the spot to leave a gratuity in situations you never used to be. It can be confusing and frustrating—not to mention guilt-inducing—especially if there are prying eyes behind you in line watching what you select on the screen.

And we're not only being asked to tip more often. There's also what's known as "tipflation"—where we're being asked to tip in higher amounts. A December 2023 nationally representative Consumer Reports survey (PDF) of 2,027 U.S. adults found that 64 percent said they were being asked to tip "much" or "somewhat" more often than they were five years ago. And over half said they felt they'd been pressured to leave a bigger tip than they wanted to. (Take our poll on tipping, below.)

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"Tipping is broken," says Harlan Scott, a hospitality consultant and restaurateur in Austin, Texas. "You often don't know if you're tipping to give an employee making twenty dollars an hour a little bonus or if you need to tip to subsidize someone being paid a minimum wage." Also unclear: Whether the person you're tipping gets traditional benefits through their employer. "It's a tremendous amount of pressure on the consumer."

Tipping expert Mike Lynn, PhD, of Cornell University—a professor of consumer behavior and marketing who has published more than 80 academic papers on tipping—points to a "perfect storm" behind the recent shift in tipping culture, based on three forces. First, technology facilitated the process in the early 2010s, allowing businesses to use tablet-based point-of-sale systems that request tips with the tap of a screen, reducing the awkwardness that can be associated with asking for one.

Then came COVID-19. "During the pandemic, people started tipping larger amounts and for services they didn't usually tip for," Lynn says. "When businesses noticed that, it gave them permission to start asking

for tipping in new contexts, and to start asking for larger amounts.”

Third, the current close-to-full employment market—coupled with inflation—has made tipping an attractive option for businesses. It’s a way to boost employee earnings without directly increasing prices or wages.

But that doesn’t mean you should feel guilty into providing a different tip amount than you mean to, whether it’s for a cup of coffee or an afternoon at the salon. “It’s true that we’re tipping more than ever, but we need to be a little bit more selective about how much we’re tipping and why,” says Jacqueline Whitmore, an etiquette expert in Florida and founder of the Protocol School of Palm Beach.

We consulted Whitmore and other experts to navigate real-life situations and offer clear solutions for making quick, informed decisions, empowering you to tip—or not—with confidence.

Signing a restaurant bill isn’t straightforward anymore. A tip of 15 to 20 percent or higher (before tax) for exceptional service is still standard. But what if you bus your own table?

A Tip Line on the Receipt Has Been Added Even Though You’ve Already Been Charged a Gratuity

Scenario: The bill for your group dinner includes a 20 percent auto-gratuity. Yet on the receipt, there’s a handwritten “thanks” from your server and a line for an additional tip. Isn’t the auto-tip enough?

The move: Unless your service was truly exceptional, leave it as is. “You are not obligated to tip extra,” Whitmore says.

You Get Partial Service

Scenario: At a casual eatery, you order at a counter but are served at a table. The payment screen asks for a tip at the time of ordering. How much for this half-self, half-served experience?

The move: Consider tipping a midrange amount—perhaps 10 percent—that reflects the hybrid nature of the service experience.

You’re Asked for a Tip When Picking up Fast Food

Scenario: You’re collecting your order at the counter when a staff member spins the screen, suggesting a 20 percent tip for handing over your pizzas and salad.

The move: When minimal service is involved, consider a few bucks or none at all. “You won’t be alone. Recent surveys have shown that around 40 percent of consumers tip for a food pickup,” Lynn says. “That’s not a majority. You don’t have to submit to pressure as much as you think.”

You’re Ordering With a QR Code

Scenario: At a new restaurant, you order and pay with a QR code instead of dealing with a waiter—but are then asked for a tip.

The move: As with counter service, make a judgment call and tip only for the actual service level you receive. (Is the food delivered to you? Did you have to set up and clear your own table?) “You might want to give the waiter something, but it’s not going to be 20 percent of the entire bill,” says Diane Gottsman, an etiquette expert. “It’s more of what you feel is appropriate.”

You’re Asked to Pay a Tip on Top of a Service Charge

Scenario: Your meal concludes and the bill lists a service charge. There’s also a line to add a tip. Isn’t a

service charge the same thing as a tip?

The move: Ask your server to clarify what the service charge is for. “Service charges aren’t one-size-fits-all,” Gottsman says. Some may be to offset the expense of operating a restaurant. But “some may go to the server. Since it involves their livelihood, most will be happy to tell you the details.”

You Wonder if a Dollar Tip Is Enough for a Cocktail

Scenario: At an upscale bar, specialty cocktails are priced at \$16, leaving you questioning the old dollar-per-drink rule.

The move: Consider the craftsmanship involved. (Did the bartender just spear a bunch of fruit and shake up the drink for a minute?) Adjust your tip to up to 20 percent of your bill depending on the bartender’s skill and effort. But the dollar-per-drink rule generally holds if you’re having, say, a glass of wine or a beer.

Delivery apps make getting food easy, but figuring out tips? That’s the tricky part.

You Can’t Tell if the Delivery Fee Is the Same as a Tip

Scenario: You’re shopping online for groceries or takeout and see a delivery fee at checkout. You wonder if it includes a tip.

The move: Delivery and service fees usually aren’t treated as tips for the driver. “Always check the website or app,” says Gottsman, who adds that a tip of 15 to 20 percent of the total bill, or a minimum of \$5 if it’s a small order, is usually appropriate.

You Prepaid the Tip

Scenario: You’ve already added a tip during the checkout process on a delivery app. When your food arrives, does this mean that no extra cash handoff is needed at the door?

The move: If you’ve tipped through the app, you’re all set. These amounts go directly to your delivery person, so no need to fumble for cash at the door. If you tipped through the app but still want to make sure the gratuity truly goes to the driver, check the app’s FAQs or ask when the delivery person arrives. Most delivery apps are transparent about their policies.

Deciding whether to give a gratuity for a home service—from a sofa delivery to a stove fix—can be a head-scratching experience. When should you grease a palm and when will a simple thanks do?

They’re Setting up a New Sofa

Scenario: After paying a hefty delivery fee for your new sofa, you wonder if tipping the delivery team is expected or necessary.

The move: Even with substantial delivery fees, acknowledging the physical effort of a delivery team with a small tip of \$5 to \$10 per person is a kind gesture. “The more stairs, the higher the tip,” suggests Jodi RR Smith, an etiquette consultant.

Your Building Handyman Unclogs Your Drain

Scenario: When someone on the maintenance staff of your building or homeowners association comes to fix a toilet or tighten a hinge, should you hand over a little extra?

The move: In general, you should be tipping maintenance employees you regularly deal with at the end of the year. But when the service goes above and beyond, a tip on the spot can express your gratitude more personally. “Especially if it’s in the middle of the night or on a major holiday,” Smith says.

The Repair Is Pricey

Scenario: A technician charges \$400 for an essential repair. Given the high cost, do you still need to tip?

The move: “Generally, skilled technicians and tradespeople like plumbers are not tipped, but it’s situational,” Smith says. If the person went above and beyond, was professional, and solved a significant problem, a tip of \$10 to \$20 might be a way to say thank you, though it’s not obligatory, given the high initial cost, she says.

At a salon or medi-spa, the only thing more complex than choosing the right kind of facial is figuring out the tipping protocol. Who knew relaxation could be so stressful?

You’re Getting Your Hair Cut by the Owner

Scenario: After a satisfying haircut at the salon, you wonder whether to tip the stylist, who happens to be the owner.

The move: “Etiquette has evolved here,” Smith says. She advises tipping your stylist every time you visit even if they’re the owner. Fifteen to 20 percent is still the standard, according to Gottsman.

Your Derm Does a Skin Check

Scenario: You’re at a dermatologist’s office that also offers cosmetic treatments, but you’re there to get a spot on your skin evaluated. When you’re leaving, a tipping option appears on the payment screen, leaving you uncertain.

The move: It’s generally accepted that you don’t tip a dermatologist—just as you wouldn’t tip any other doctor, or an attorney.

Ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft have brought added tipping twists to figure out.

You Don’t Know Whether to Tip the Uber Driver

Scenario: At the end of a trip, an app prompts you for a tip. But you remember a time when tipping wasn’t an option, and you’re unsure about the current expectations.

The move: You’re right. Uber, for instance, didn’t allow tipping until 2017. But today, tipping 15 percent as a baseline—with room to increase for exceptional service—is appropriate. “It’s crucial to remember that ride-share drivers often don’t have the benefits that come with traditional employment,” Smith says.

You’re Taking a Taxi, Not an Uber

Scenario: You’ve just arrived at your destination via a taxi you hailed on the street. But have new practices influenced tipping norms for cabs?

The move: “The standard for tipping cab drivers remains at about 15 percent,” Smith advises. If the tip screen you see starts with higher options, feel free to enter a custom amount. But “consider more if it’s a very short trip or it’s raining, or if they’ve taken you a long way to a place where they’re unlikely to pick up another fare.”

What’s the right way to tip someone who works behind the scenes? And what if you forget cash at the valet stand?

You’re Traveling With Your Messy Family

Scenario: You’re getting ready to check out of your hotel and you think about the housekeeping staff

cleaning up after you and your two young kids. Should you leave a bigger tip for the extra mess?

The move: Yes. “Start with \$3 to \$5 per day, and with each extra guest add \$1 per person to cover the additional effort,” Whitmore says. “Tip daily instead of at the end, since housekeeping staff may change.”

You’re Paying for Room Service

Scenario: You’re signing for your room-service meal, noticing the menu mentioned that gratuity was included, yet there’s still a line for an extra tip. Now you’re puzzled.

The move: “Always start by reviewing your bill to confirm that the gratuity was included” as the menu indicated it would be, Gottsman says. “If not, a tip of 15 to 20 percent of the bill is appropriate. You don’t need to tip again for tray pickup.”

Your Concierge Gives You Easy Directions

Scenario: After asking the hotel concierge for directions to the best nearby coffee shop, you wonder if this simple request merits a tip.

The move: “For quick directions to the nearest coffee shop, no tip is required,” Gottsman says. “But for services like snagging theater tickets or dinner reservations, tip \$5 to \$10. For helping you snag hard-to-get tickets or bookings, \$20 or more is appropriate.”

You’re Not Sure What to Tip the Luggage Attendant

Scenario: They help with your suitcases, and you have a couple. You’re wondering how much to tip for this brief yet helpful service.

The move: Typically, the tip is \$1 to \$2 per bag. But if you have just one or two, a \$5 tip might be more appropriate. A rule that Gottsman follows is “if they touch it”—meaning bags, extra pillows, etc.—take that as a sign that it’s a good time to tip.

You’re Out of Cash

Scenario: You’re at the valet stand, ready to drive off, when you realize your wallet’s empty of the standard tip (\$2 to \$5). Do you ask the person who just retrieved your car if they would accept Venmo or another type of mobile payment in place of a cash tip?

The move: Sure. The digital era has made this question more acceptable. “I would strongly encourage it,” Smith says.

Editor’s Note: This article also appeared in the July 2024 issue of Consumer Reports magazine.

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