

# Do your customers think your product is worth the wait?

While there are some who argue that it heightens anticipation, most will just be turned off. However, there are ways to turn this around. **BY NEETA LACHMANDAS**

**I**T SEEMS as if queuing is almost part of the Singapore culture – we're happy to queue for things we know will be worth the wait.

When McDonald's first launched its Hello Kitty collection as part of its meal offering in early 2000, long queues were a common sight. Even after more than a decade, the frenzy continues. According to news reports, queues would start in the wee hours of the morning at McDonald's outlets following the announcement of the launch of a new Hello Kitty collection, with the lines growing to number in the hundreds in a few hours.

Last year, two local hawker stalls became overnight sensations after Michelin Guide Singapore announced that they had each been awarded a Michelin star. The announcement was soon followed by long lines and a great deal of buzz surrounding the stalls.

In these instances, the wait was perhaps deemed "worth it", because the reward was a "limited edition" collectible, or being one of the first few to experience something that is talked about. In both cases, the queues eventually became more reasonable after the hype died down. What happens then, when a wait is inevitable?

## Waiting customers tend to be less satisfied and loyal

In the 2017 Q3 Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) study of the Food & Beverage (F&B) sector, it was found that longer waiting times were associated with lower satisfaction and loyalty among respondents.

For fast food restaurants, cafes and coffee houses, satisfaction and loyalty registered a statistically significant decline for customers who felt that they had waited 10 minutes or more to queue and receive their order. Meanwhile, respondents who perceived a wait time of 20 minutes or more to receive their food at restaurants also gave lower satisfaction and loyalty scores.

## Impact of technology and the consumer on F&B

The F&B landscape has changed with the emergence and proliferation of online food delivery companies such as Deliveroo, FoodPanda and UberEATS, catering services, and the use of online reservation platforms including Chope, HungryGoWhere and Quandoo.

This has given diners today a wide variety of options for food, with a high degree of convenience. They can kick back at home and wait for food to be delivered to their doorstep or make reservations ahead of time and expect to be seated upon arrival.



Online food delivery companies may also have changed customers' tolerance for long waiting times. PHOTO: DELIVEROO

The ease and immediacy of these services combined with hectic lifestyles and possibly longer working hours may have inadvertently shifted something in the psyche of consumers. Do they now expect food service to be as immediate as well?

While anecdotally we have all heard of customers who would be willing to wait 30 minutes or even up to an hour for experiences they deem to be "worth it", this is more an exception rather than the norm. With that in mind, what should F&B operators in general do given the correlation between longer waiting time and lower satisfaction and loyalty?

## Improving the waiting experience

While people understand and accept that waiting is part and parcel of the experience of eating out, they become increasingly frustrated if the waiting time is longer than what they are prepared to accept, or if the experience is unpleasant. This is a scenario that is paralleled in the medical services sector. In the CSISG 2016 Q4 study of the healthcare sector, longer perceived waiting time was associated with lower satisfaction ratings for hospitals. Yet, the attribute that had the most significant impact on perceived quality was the waiting experience.

## Make it feel like they're not waiting

One of the ways to make waiting not feel like waiting is to give your consumers mobility while they are waiting to be served. This includes adopting an

SMS queue management system, akin to what the banking sector has adopted – this gives consumers more control over their time. Some F&B establishments have also invested in technology that allows customers to see how many people are ahead of them in the line and this information can then help a customer decide if he is willing or able to wait.

Other establishments such as Hai Di Lao, which is known for their long wait times, have designed experiences that make waiting less unpleasant. By offering games, a children's play room, free manicures and massages and even snacks, they have turned the waiting experience into one that's enjoyable and more easily tolerated.

Another way to optimise the customers' waiting time is to allow customers who are in line to pre-order their food and drinks so that by the time they are seated, their order would arrive shortly.

## Finish with a smile

As patience is tested by the perception of long waiting times, it is human nature to be a little more expectant when it comes to service. F&B operators should bear this in mind and ensure that at the end of the wait, customers would be met by service staff who are attentive, able to meet their needs and be professional in their interaction. Nothing would affect an experience with a brand more negatively than a double whammy of a long wait for an order that ends with bad service.

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