

# Pre-empt, prevent, be proactive

Service culture means taking feedback seriously and embracing it as an opportunity to build customer loyalty

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 INSTITUTE OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE AT  
 SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

## DOUGLAS CHEW

BEYOND infrastructure and hardware, telecommunication companies here have invested heavily to build their service culture.

"Service is part of our organisational culture," says Ms Candy Chua, vice-president of Consumer Operations at Singtel.

"It is a key differentiator for our industry, and we take feedback very seriously. We follow three Ps to pre-empt, prevent and be proactive, so that we can deliver the best service," she says, adding that Singtel dissects, analyses and investigates all feedback, leveraging it to improve its operations and service standards.

"In the case of any failure, service recovery is the one chance we have to help the customer, and if we can do it well, the customer will remain loyal to us," she adds.

These efforts appear to have paid off. Customer satisfaction rose for the Info-communications sector by 1.6 per cent year on year to 68.5 points, on a scale of zero to 100, in this quarter's Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) study.

The study was conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Parsing the data, Mr Chen Yongchang, ISES' head of research and consulting, observes that network reliability and the ability to closely monitor and nimbly adjust subscription

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**MS CANDY CHUA**  
 vice-president  
 Consumer Operations  
 Singtel



Industry experts shared their insights at the recent CSISG results announcement. PHOTOS: INSTITUTE OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE AT SMU

plans to meet the changing needs of consumers appear to be key predictors of satisfaction and loyalty for the mobile telecom and broadband sub-sectors.

He suggests that telecommunication companies need to pay close attention to new customers for both these sub-sectors, as those who are less satisfied can easily take their business to a different operator after their initial contract period is over.

Hence, high service levels are important to build customer loyalty.

### Happy staff makes for happy customers

At Singtel, employees play an important role in furthering customer service.

"Despite cost pressures, we keep in mind our longer term business model and prepare our people for it.

"We want to capitalise on their strengths and develop them to be subject matter experts by raising their competency and skills levels through training and practice," says Ms Chua.

MI likewise believes motivated employees deliver better customer experiences.



MI believes motivated staff deliver better customer experiences. PHOTO: MI

"MI strives to offer a supportive and inclusive workplace with continual investment in training, mentorship programmes, scholarships, job rotation and other initiatives to help our employees' achieve their potential," says its spokesman.

The telco promotes from within where possible, with all its supervisors previously serving in the frontline as customer service officers.

StarHub recently received the People Centric Award at the BEI Asia Awards, validating its efforts in developing its people, and providing good welfare benefits and training.

According to the telco, its employee

turnover rate was 12 per cent last year, outperforming the national average of 24 per cent.

"We believe that keeping customers happy hinges on the people in the organisation. Happy staff make for happy customers," says Mrs Chan Hoi San, StarHub's human resource senior vice-president.

"We cultivate a safe and caring environment as well as an eco-system that is conducive for both personal and professional growth.

"In this way, our staff — affectionately known as StarHubbers — are empowered to become the biggest advocates of happiness, driving the way we interact with and tailor products and services for our customers," she adds.

Notably, Wireless@SG, which offers free wireless Internet access in public places locally, saw a sharp improvement in its satisfaction score.

Mr Chen of ISES believes this could be due to the successful implementation and take-up of free Wi-Fi service at 33 MRT stations in the months leading up to the survey period.

## The art of service

"In a world of digitisation and technology, we must not forget the human beings that make up the industries. They are our secret weapons in delivering great customer satisfaction. If a customer is giving you feedback, that is a great customer who cares for your brand. How you handle them is either a fantastic opportunity to build their loyalty or to turn them away from you."



**MS NEETA LACHMANDAS**  
 executive director  
 Institute of Service Excellence at SMU

"When companies that face high expectations from its customers meet those expectations, they enjoy even greater customer satisfaction.

Customer expectations are what customers use to fill in the blanks when interacting with companies and their products and services."



**MR CHEN YONGCHANG**  
 head  
 Research and Consulting  
 Institute of Service Excellence at SMU

"When customers interact with the brands online, they expect an even more enhanced experience when they visit the store.

This means retailers may need to reimagine how they do things to enhance the journey of the customer, who has already entered the store by going to it online, before entering its physical stores.

Let your customers be your compass to guide how you run your company, not your competitors. Take note of what your customers commonly ask or need, and put that into your system."



**MR BENTLEY WILLIAMS**  
 chief  
 WOW! Academy

"If we as the telco service provider can offer you the shape and form in how you want to interact with us, we believe customer satisfaction will increase."



**MS CANDY CHUA**  
 vice-president  
 Consumer Operations  
 Singtel

"First, listen to your customers, listen to understand their needs. I see customers from my heart and adopt a holistic approach to understand the root cause of their unhappiness or their underlying needs.

I use the acronym RUST to remind myself how to deliver customer service: Respect your customers. Understand their pain points, each customer is Special, and build Trust and rapport with them."



**MS MALIKA SOORAIYAH**  
 customer service team leader  
 Singtel

"We need to put ourselves in the shoes of our customers even when we design our internal processes so that we can deliver service to them even more effectively."



**MS RACHEL TAN**  
 general manager  
 DFS Changi Airport

"Customers today know their products before coming to a shop. However, online websites do not talk to you but we at the shop can talk to you. I enjoy interacting with people, which is why I joined the service line. Being patient is one of the important factors that can lead to success in delivering good service."



**MS WENDY LEE**  
 sales associate  
 DFS

"Motivated staff who are engaged in their work and by extension, to the company, are inspired to represent Zalora well to our customers.

This is relevant throughout all functions — from the backend developers, who smoothen the customer experience journey as customers make their purchases online, to the front-facing staff in our customer experience team who deal directly with customers."



**MR TITO COSTA**  
 chief marketing officer  
 Zalora Singapore

## Innovating to provide better service

RETAIL companies have been innovating both online and in-store to provide better service to their customers.

To reach out to its customers digitally, DFS rolled out its Shop and Collect online initiative in 2014.

The service has been popular, but Ms Rachel Tan, general manager of DFS Changi Airport, says: "The service and memorable experience that our frontline staff provide cannot be replicated online. Our store designs provide a sense of space in showcasing our products and create a desire to return to our shops."

Customer satisfaction for the retail sector has risen in the first quarter of 2016, according to the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG).

The Retail sector scored 71.7 points on a zero to 100 scale, an improvement of 2.4 per cent from last year.

DFS was the top performer in the departmental store sub-sector, with 73.2 points, followed by Takashimaya and John Little.

"In this difficult economic climate, we are seeing service competitiveness being leveraged as a differentiator.

"Retailers are paying more attention to store ambience, exploring digital innovations and refreshing their brand strategies to better align with changing consumer profiles," says Ms Neeta Lachmandas, executive director of the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at Singapore Management University.

Ms Tan attributes DFS' good performance in the CSISG to its learning development culture, which was created, supported and celebrated by the company's management.

DFS practises a "train the trainer" approach, where in-house leaders take charge of trainee sales staff. These trainers demonstrate how to deliver service, drawing from their own training and experience, imparting the emotional intelligence required to excel in sales roles to the trainees.

This in-house training also builds cohesion among the staff and, coupled with a high manager-to-employee ratio, ensures effective on-the-job coaching when staff return to the sales floor.

As evidence of DFS' successful staff retention, 35 per cent of DFS' staff have



Store ambience can add to a customer's total retail experience. PHOTO: DFS CHANGI

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**MS NEETA LACHMANDAS**  
 executive director  
 Institute of Service Excellence at SMU

been with the company for over 10 years.

Every month, the company recognises and celebrates its outstanding performers on the shop floor with a staff engagement day.

"We have a family feeling at DFS. Our learning culture and engagement activities to create positive surprises internally demonstrate our appreciation for our staff and help us recruit and retain talent," says Ms Tan.

The new e-commerce sub-sector scored 71.1 points.

Zalora took first place at 73.2 points followed by Taobao/Tmall and Groupon.

The top three drivers that had the most impact on increasing satisfaction scores were timeliness of product delivery, fair returns and exchange policies, and the ease of checking out items and payment on site.

This indicates reliability and convenience are top priorities for customers shopping on e-commerce sites, says Mr Chen Yongchang, head of research and consulting at ISES.

Zalora meets these priorities by offering free shipping for orders over \$40.

In addition to direct delivery, customers can self-collect at selected 7-Eleven convenience stores and POPStations islandwide, taking the hassle out of having to be at home to receive their deliveries. Customers who change their mind enjoy 30 days of free returns.

"There are definitely costs and risks involved when offering free returns, but we put our customer's satisfaction above everything else and want to assure those who shop on Zalora have the freedom to swap for a new item or get their purchases refunded when needed," says Mr Tito Costa, Zalora Singapore's chief marketing officer.

To keep customer satisfaction high, Zalora provides a wide assortment of global high street fashion brands, some which are not available in the region, such as River Island and Burton Menswear London.

"Zalora aims to keep up with the latest trends in the industry. For example, to ride on the Korean wave in Singapore, we offer a decent assortment of Korean fashion labels for young women and with plans to expand to offer menswear as well," adds Mr Costa.

For the supermarkets sub-sector, the CSISG score was flat year on year.

Cold Storage claimed the top spot with 72.5 points.

Sheng Siong came in second, improving by a statistically significant 3.5 per cent, which could be related to its expansion of existing stores and addition of new stores across the island in the last two years.

### Easier payment drives customer satisfaction

To account for the recent increase in the number of self-checkout counters deployed across supermarket chains in Singapore, ISES measured whether the adoption had an impact on customer satisfaction levels.

The study showed customer satisfaction levels correlate positively with the ease of making payment.

"Given the manpower-constrained environment that we are operating in, it is heartening to see that the introduction of self-checkout counters at supermarkets has, in fact, complemented cashiers in facilitating a smooth payment process," says Mr Chen.

The ease of making payment at supermarkets is the most important driver of satisfaction at supermarkets.

Ms Lachmandas notes that customer service and sales jobs can make for good careers.

"There is a lot of mobility and opportunities in service roles, such as leading, coaching or becoming product specialists. Companies that provide clear career paths will benefit from more motivated sales staff, which translates to higher customer satisfaction," she says.

### DOUGLAS CHEW

#### About CSISG

CSISG is Singapore's only national customer satisfaction measurement tool with cross-sector capabilities. Conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at Singapore Management University, the CSISG study computes customer satisfaction scores at the national, sector, sub-sector and company levels to produce a rigorous, objective and comprehensive assessment of Singapore's service levels. For this study, 8,584 locals and 905 tourists were interviewed between January and April this year.