

Striving for customer happiness

Opinions differ on the reasons behind contrasting satisfaction data from locals and tourists, reports **TEH SHI NING**

TOURISTS are less happy with Singapore's hotels, attractions and dining than they were a year ago. Despite a larger decline in satisfaction levels, they remained happier than locals are with those service providers.

While tourist satisfaction with the food-and-beverage sector here fell from 72.2 points to 70.6 points this year, as measured on the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG), this was still a higher score than that for locals, which edged down from 67.5 last year to 67 this year.

The contrast was a little starker for the tourism sector. Singapore residents were happier with the service provided by hotels, driving their satisfaction with the tourism sector as a whole up to 70.2 points, from 68.4 last year. But tourists' satisfaction slipped from 77.8 last year to 72.6 this year, as visitors found attractions, hotels and tour operators as well as travel and ticketing agencies here considerably less pleasant.

The reasons behind this fall are harder to tease out, though the trend is in line with the independent findings of at least one attractions operator, Sentosa.

Highly competitive

"The trend in Sentosa's monthly guest satisfaction score from June to August 2012 is consistent with the CSISG 2012 results. While our tourist satisfaction rating remained at a level similar to last year's, we have seen significant improvement in the satisfaction scores of local guests compared to the previous year," says Lim Suu Kuan, divisional director of Guest Experience at Sentosa Leisure Group.

What can be said is that the tourism sector is a highly competitive one. "Competition is not limited to local players but extended to global players. Our study did not capture respondents' evaluation of competition



Hardware matters: The recently completed sheltered link bridge from the Coach Park to Beach Station at Sentosa (above); Ms Lim of Sentosa Leisure Group (above, right) says they have seen significant improvement in the satisfaction scores of local guests compared to the previous year

outside of Singapore. My guess is the bar might have been raised in the global tourism landscape. If this is so, tourists might be using a higher bar in their evaluation of local players," says Caroline Lim, director of the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES), which compiles the CSISG.

Tourism-linked businesses here all face the challenge of rising competition for the tourist dollar from regional and international markets, too. "I think, as a destination, Singapore is definitely facing competition," says ISES' Ms Lim.

Visitor arrivals to Singapore continued to grow this year, even though year-on-year growth slowed to 3.1 per cent in Q3 from 8.3 per cent in

Q2. "The increase in visitor numbers could put a strain on the tourism industries. This also suggests that the previously successful operating model is being challenged as the visitor arrivals increase and as expectations and requirements change," the ISES director says.

The bulk of Singapore's visitors arrive from Asean, China and India, which are all rapidly growing economies. "Visitors may use the increasingly sophisticated consumer experience in their home country as a point of reference," she adds. But she also thinks the profile of tourists to Singapore has not changed drastically enough to explain changes in customer satisfaction year-on-year.

Looking at things from a tourist's

perspective, ISES academic director Marcus Lee suggests another factor behind the dip in tourist satisfaction.

"Singapore's combination of world-class establishments interspersed with ones that are far from ideal can make up a jarring experience for anyone unfamiliar with the services landscape in Singapore," Dr Lee said.

"In my opinion, the lack of consistency of the customer experience is the Achilles' heel of Singapore's services sectors. While a visitor may experience impeccable service at, for example, Universal Studios Singapore, this same visitor may be less than impressed by services he experiences elsewhere on our island," he says.

Universal Studios Singapore was



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through a mystery shopping programme.

Hardware matters too, and Sentosa has been reviewing ways to improve tourists' navigation and transport round the island and revamp some of its facilities. "We recently completed a sheltered link bridge from the Coach Park to Beach Station, creating a more pleasant experience for tour groups who make their way on foot from the Coach Park to the Songs of the Sea attraction located next to the Beach Station," says Ms Lim.

Best practices

But Sentosa seems to recognise that its success is also linked to that of Singapore's wider tourism sector, across which Dr Lee observes inconsistencies in service standards.

So while it works on improving the experience of guests to the island, Sentosa also "engages other tourism industry players on best practices to enhance the tourism sector's customer satisfaction scores and cultivate a more robust service culture", says Ms Lim.

one of the few attractions which did not see a significant drop in satisfaction levels this round. The Night Safari and Sentosa were two others.

Says Sentosa Leisure Group's Ms Lim: "Creating positive guest experiences underpins the Sentosa Leisure Group's commitment to service excellence."

It has named its customer-centric initiative the Sentosa WAVE, which stands for how Sentosa would like each guest to feel after a visit: "welcomed, assured, valued and energised". The strategy is to "raise fascination and reduce inconvenience" for guests, says Ms Lim.

Apart from running service training and recognition programmes for Sentosa's staff, the group ensures that service quality is monitored