

LABOUR CRUNCH

Diners less satisfied with restaurants

Customer expectations are not being met. By **ZEINAB YUSUF SAIWALLA**

DESPITE having in place various training programmes and innovative strategies, the difficulty that restaurants face in retaining and employing service staff is beginning to show.

Results from the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) recorded a 0.3 per cent dip in customer satisfaction scores across the various restaurants surveyed.

Caroline Lim, director of the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at Singapore Management University (SMU), which conducted the study, said that the drop in scores for restaurants was due to customer expectations being unmet.

In the CSISG model, customer satisfaction is driven by three things: customer expectations; perceived quality; and perceived value of the products and services delivered.

"This finding suggests that the conventional wisdom of businesses to delight customers by over-delivering is not necessarily efficient, nor the only strategy. F&B service providers can achieve comparatively higher satisfaction levels from their customers simply by understanding and delivering to their expectations," she said.

However, restaurant operators highlighted that meeting customer expectations is in itself a challenge primarily owing to the lack of service staff.

RE&S managing director John Yek said: "We have been and are still facing a very severe manpower crunch which seems to be getting worse, and this is hampering our training efforts due to the shortage of available time."

Last year, RE&S was among the top scorers for customer satisfaction with a score of 70.6 points. This year, the operator of Japanese restaurants including Kuriya and Kuishin-bo received a score of 68.1 or 3.6 per cent lower than 2011.

According to Mr Yek, measures have been put in place to improve service standards including providing a more transparent link between training, good service and staff remuneration as well as conducting reviews to create a better environment which in turn can help reduce the high turnover that it experiences.

Mr Yek said that he hopes more can be done at an industry level to improve standards. "One way is to make our industry more attractive



Feed them: For Sakae Holdings, which owns a stable of restaurant brands including the Sakae Sushi chain, the challenge is to better manage the throngs of customers who frequent its restaurants. FILE PHOTO

to Singaporeans so that we will be able to find people who are prepared to invest themselves to improving industry standards, and not merely use the industry as a stepping stone," he elaborated.

For Sakae Holdings, the challenge is to better manage the throngs of customers who frequent their restaurants.

"The main factor (for lower customer satisfaction scores) is probably now with even higher consumer patronage, guests need to be seated and served even faster to reduce waiting time. Higher consumer volume also means our kitchens need to prepare and serve a lot faster," said Douglas Foo, chief executive of Sakae Holdings.

The group, which owns a stable of restaurant brands including the Sakae Sushi chain, saw its score fall from 69.6 to 67.9 this year.

Still, one restaurant group defied the sectoral decline, performing better than last year. TungLok Group received a customer satisfaction score of 71.6, the highest

across all F&B establishments including fast-food restaurants, food courts and cafes. This was 1.2 per cent higher than the group's score last year.

According to Andrew Tjioe, executive chairman of TungLok, the improvement in customer satisfaction scores was due to committed efforts in ensuring consistent food quality.

He added: "We have continued to leverage on the established central kitchen and procurement functions to mitigate rising costs and wages, as well as to improve productivity at the back-end and service levels at our individual outlets, to alleviate pressures on manpower in a tight labour market."

These measures include purchasing in bulk to negotiate better prices as well as centralising tasks such as peeling, washing and preparation of sauces and semi-processed dishes to ensure consistency and keep staff levels at the minimum.

Crystal Jade, which saw its customer satisfaction scores decrease

from 69.0 to 67.3, has committed to ensure customer satisfaction and high service standards.

This includes regularly offering new meal concepts to appeal to diners as well as using the latest technology to reduce waiting time and improve service.

"Ultimately, restaurants are a service business, and we need the right combination of people, processes and technology to offer great dining experiences and to achieve higher customer satisfaction," explained the spokesman for Crystal Jade.

Despite the dip in overall scores due to more challenging working circumstances, restaurants are mostly taking the results in their stride, acknowledging the well-known service mantra that the customer is always right.

"We should always put ourselves in the consumers' shoes, see through their eyes and listen to their feedback. They provide valuable insights that help us to improve and serve them better," explained Mr Foo.