

It pays to play nice

An eatery's response to negative feedback has shone the spotlight on how food and beverage outlets deal with complaints



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Seafood restaurant Crab In Da Bag's response to a customer's bad review on its Facebook page has stirred up an online storm, sparking a debate on how food and beverage establishments should deal with negative feedback on social media.

In her two-star review, customer Joan Soon, who visited the outlet at SportsHub on Jan 2, wrote that the crab she was served was "the smallest ever" and at the price of \$55, was "daylight robbery".

The restaurant's founder Tan Pei Pei tells The Sunday Times that her business partner called Ms Soon to apologise.

But a member of the management team, however, also posted a rebuttal to Ms Soon's review, which suggested that the restaurant had

already done enough to appease her, including offering her a 10 per cent discount off her bill.

Ms Soon, 32, was particularly upset that the post also alluded to the fact that she works at Citibank. "It was unprofessional of them to reveal my personal details. They should not have replied in that manner."

Netizens were critical of the tone of the restaurant's reply and the disclosure of Ms Soon's personal details.

When The Sunday Times contacted Ms Tan, 50, she admits that the way it replied to Ms Soon's review was "stupid" and regrets how it handled the situation.

Crab In Da Bag also has an outlet at Big Splash in East Coast Park.

Ms Tan subsequently posted an

apology on its Facebook page and offered to refund Ms Soon's bill as well as a meal on the house. She adds: "The staff who posted this was trying to stand up for the restaurant and explain our side of the story. He has since resigned and is in a state of depression."

The episode has shone the spotlight on how establishments deal with complaints, particularly in the age of social media.

Says Ms Neeta Lachmandas, executive director of the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University: "This incident went viral because of the way the restaurant responded."

Dr Denis Ang, a course manager for the diploma in Food & Beverage Business at Nanyang Polytechnic,



Crab In Da Bag (above) attracted online flak for the way it handled a customer's complaint. PHOTO: ST FILE

says businesses should show "sincerity and appreciation" when handling comments.

"Some feedback may be better addressed through other channels such as speaking to the customer over the telephone."

Ms Lim Rui Shan, executive director of the Restaurant Association of Singapore, suggests that establishments with social media pages should consider hiring a public relations firm to represent them.

Mr Yuan Oei, chairman of the Prive Group, which owns 10 F&B outlets, says its marketing team replies to all comments on the restaurants' Facebook pages. "We take every comment seriously and will investigate if needed. You'll never get anywhere by proving a customer wrong unless he says something malicious."

Mr Bjorn Shen, owner of Middle-Eastern restaurant Artichoke, took it upon himself to investigate a complaint in late October.

A customer had sent a private message via the restaurant's Facebook page, saying he had experienced "terrible service" after he and a friend were told to wait for a table as they did not have a reservation.

After speaking to his staff and looking at CCTV footage, Mr Shen uploaded snippets of the footage on his personal Facebook page with an explanation of how the customer's complaint did not hold water.

He explains: "I found he had not included the full details of the incident. My reaction was damage control."

When he learnt that the customer was receiving nasty messages subsequently, he removed the post and video as he did not want the matter to get out of hand. "My intention was not to prove anyone wrong or right, but to protect my business and put out the correct information."

Mr Samdy Kan, chief of F&B company The Cre8 Group, which has four restaurants, says there is no escaping social media.

"People might see good reviews and come by the restaurant or cancel their reservations after reading a bad review. We need to make sure we act appropriately."

The Crab In Da Bag incident has drawn attention to another eatery, Lavastone Steakhouse, whose owner Chia Shee Yap writes lengthy replies to bad reviews on its Facebook page. This has rubbed some netizens the wrong way, who say that he is too defensive.

But he says he prefers to be transparent and adds: "If a complaint has been published in a public domain, I need to explain to the customer publicly too. I'm a trouble-shooter, so I will put out the facts. I'm telling nothing but the truth."

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