

# SMU team also does customised research

By LYNN KAN

SCORES, relative gains and declines are what users and participants of indices care about. The Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) is no different, providing quarterly numbers which act as a temperature reading of how differently consumers view certain service sectors and companies now, compared to a year ago.

Beyond those headline national numbers, the team of researchers at the Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) that produces the CSISG also works with companies individually on the nuts and bolts of its service or customer experience.

After the scores are published, the research team behind the CSISG may get invited to break down what the scores mean to companies.

"Sometimes these presentations evolve into customised research studies for the company," said director of ISES, Caroline Lim.

Ms Lim says project topics could look into the details such as how polite a staff member was or some-



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thing more "intangible" – "like how trustworthy the employee serving the customer was perceived to be."

The lean 10-person research team at ISES takes charge of customised cases. But when the task at hand gets more complex, ISES' links to the wider SMU faculty come into play.

Over 300 SMU faculty members can be tapped for their knowledge in and

views on marketing, strategy, operations and organisational behaviour.

When the ISES team embarks on an in-depth study, it usually combines both qualitative studies – which usually have small groups or respondents – and quantitative research.

In one such study, ISES held focus group sessions to examine why visitor numbers were falling at a particular attraction.

At the same time, ISES needs to embark on quantitative studies to confirm their initial findings.

"Some suggestions from qualitative research can seem intuitive, others outlandish. This is where quantitative research can come in to validate findings and possible solutions," said Ms Lim.

"Are people truly put off by the narrow shrubbery-lined walkway into the attraction? Or do they appreciate the rustic atmosphere and are actually put off by something else entirely? Perhaps it would be the availability of onsite F&B or lack thereof?"

"These issues will be surfaced in qualitative studies and validated through quantitative research."

A customised case may also start from the other way round: ISES may have numerical data showing plummeting satisfaction with a company's particular programme and will then step in with more investigative focus groups to find out why.

"Rather than purely 'quantitative' or 'qualitative' studies, ISES uses both these different methods to derive insights and recommend solutions for companies," says Ms Lim.

There are pitfalls to each method. Focus groups often get delayed because of the respondents' scheduling differences, says Ms Lim.

And for quantitative studies like the CSISG, the

volume of face-to-face surveying stretches into the thousands each quarter and if the team is unable to find enough respondents, that "sometimes extends our timelines".

At the end of the day, not every recommendation that results from the studies gets implemented.

What matters in the "long and continuous" journey towards service excellence is that the first step is taken.

"Management may sometimes be reluctant to embark on sweeping changes; we understand and empathise with that.

"But those small steps that they take, even just to read a report on what irks their customers, is a step in the right direction," said Ms Lim.



A quarterly series brought to you by the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES). Featuring findings from the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore, it also reveals insights on leadership and strategy from industry leaders, particularly in leveraging customer satisfaction as a competitive advantage.

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