

Food-court segment shows steady, significant improvement



Improving service: The ease of finding a seat, waiting time in queues, the order-taking process, courtesy of the service staff, food quality and cleanliness are among the 'touchpoints' included in the ISES survey. FILE PHOTO

Survey highlights areas of operations to target to raise customer satisfaction levels

By **TEH SHI NING**

THE very nature of a food court – with its many vendors and wide customer base – poses a challenge when it comes to customer satisfaction.

It is no surprise then that food courts form the food and beverage (F&B) sub-sector with the lowest level of customer satisfaction, compared to other F&B segments such as restaurants, fast-food joints and cafes.

Although its score of 64.8 falls under the F&B sector average of 67.7, the food-court segment has in fact shown steady and significant improvement since its customer satisfaction levels were first measured in 2010.

In the latest round of scores, the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES) also published for the first time individual scores for food-court operators Kopitiam, Koufu and Food Republic. All performed poorer than the sub-sector average, which was pulled up by "other food courts".

Company-specific scoring is possible when a sizeable enough number of respondents to the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore questionnaire share their experiences with a company. Typically there are about 250 respondents for each company that is scored.

The ease of finding a seat, waiting time in queues, the order-taking process, courtesy of the service staff, accuracy of change returned, food quality and cleanliness were among the "touchpoints" included in the survey.

ISES thinks its findings on these can translate into simple insights for

food court operators on which areas of their operations to target, should they wish to raise customer satisfaction levels.

ISES data analysis shows that improving the performance of food quality, order-taking process, cleanliness and courtesy of service staff had the strongest impact on satisfaction levels, says Caroline Lim, ISES director. "Food court operators can look at these touchpoints as those that matter to their customers' perceptions of quality," she says.

This may also be useful in terms of allocating resources to ensure customer satisfaction, particularly given the diverse customer base food courts tend to attract. "Operators can use these results to prioritise touchpoint improvements according to what is most important to customers," she says.

And this can be done without having to exacerbate what is presently a difficult manpower situation for many F&B operators given the cuts in foreign labour quotas and Singaporeans' reluctance on take on certain jobs.

"Manpower or the lack thereof is certainly a challenge Singapore's service industry is grappling with. But that does not mean it has to come at the expense of customer satisfaction," says Ms Lim.

For instance, the way orders are taken in food courts was found to be important to customers. And that can be improved by re-sequencing process steps and need not involve extra hires, Ms Lim explains.

"In addition, raising customer satisfaction also increases productivity. High satisfaction leads to higher consumption. This translates into higher revenue and productivity gains for companies," she adds.

Still, food-court operators have had to find ways to cope with the manpower shortage. "The manpower shortage is a major concern in the F&B industry. We try to tackle this issue as a team by working with both our landlords and tenants to minimise staff turnover and to increase staff retention through providing a conducive working environment," says Food Junction Holdings' customer relations manager Claudine Tay.

Kopitiam, too, recently teamed up with a grassroots organisations to promote the "tray return" stations it has set up at several food courts. This is to encourage customers to return their trays and maximise the effectiveness of its workforce.

Convinced that customer satisfaction is crucial to ensure continued patronage, Food Junction also decided to set up a customer relations department last year. This unit is responsible for responding quickly to customers and communicating with them effectively.

"The department also looks at how Food Junction can improve on its service offerings in the areas of hygiene, quality of food, service standards and making sure that the tenant mix at each food court is appealing and compels customers to dine there," Ms Tay says.

Since this department was formed, Food Junctions has more than halved the number of complaints it receives. "We have also adopted suggestions from customers to enhance their overall dining experience," she says.

This is in addition to periodic checks from the management on food courts, to ensure that tenants and cleaning companies meet the standards set by the company.