

# Challenge of achieving service excellence

By **KAN KWOK LEONG**

WHEN officers from Certis Cisco Security stop a vehicle for inspection, they are instructed to greet the passengers and address them as “sir” or “madam” before proceeding with their checks. And if they are ever asked for directions, they are advised against pointing, which some people may find rude.

These matters may seem trivial when measured against their primary role of providing security, but they are underpinned by the organisation’s recognition that beefing up its service capability is key to its continued success.

“Our business has a huge number of employees providing services directly to clients. Our goal is to deliver service excellence so that the client will be delighted,” said Tony Hong, senior vice president of Security Business Group at Certis Cisco Security, who was speaking during a panel session at the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES) industry forum.

More than just paying the usual lip service, the company – which also provides shelvers to libraries and concierges to hospitals – tries to instill service excellence into the fabric of its operations by putting it as a key element in every employee’s official job description.

In a similar vein, giving top-notch service is “non-negotiable” for financial services corporation American Express, said the company’s Singapore head.

“What we do, our competitors can also do but service is the one reason we can be different. If we don’t keep improving our service we will lose our market share,” said Yoshimi Nakajima, country manager, Singapore, of American Express International Inc.

But maintaining a high level of service is no easy feat, as customers are getting more demanding, she added.

One challenge facing businesses here is how to motivate employees to deliver excellent service, and retain those in a tight labour market.



**‘What we do, our competitors can also do but service is the one reason we can be different. If we don’t keep improving our service we will lose our market share.’**

– Yoshimi Nakajima, country manager, Singapore, of American Express International Inc, speaking at the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES) industry forum

One possible solution highlighted by the panellists is to give talented junior staff a high level of responsibility so that they feel valued by their employers.

“If you give people responsibility they will put more into their work and improve productivity, but you need to trust them. The benefits outweigh the risks,” said Harry Markl, regional managing director of online fashion retailer Zalora.

The panel then dealt with the issue of how to drive productivity higher within an organisation.

Ms Nakajima stressed that achieving higher productivity is impossible without first understanding customer expectations, which can change constantly.

“We have to give our employees training on how to achieve that, because expectations change day by day. It is a long journey, but it is im-

portant because once we have a relationship, we like to keep it forever,” she said.

Meanwhile, Zalora attempts to be more productive by offering to sell customers additional products at the checkout stage. These are likely to be smaller accessories that are easy to add on at the end of the purchasing process, explained Mr Markl.

“It is all about optimising real estate on the site, the probability of adding products to the carts,” he said.

To better serve its customers, the e-commerce player looks at the data regarding their customers’ browsing behaviour and history in order to better target their buying preferences.

For Certis Cisco, rather than trying to sell more, the company attempts to convince their clients to make do with less manpower by us-

ing better technology or adopting a more efficient process.

“When the customer says he needs X number of people, it is very difficult to tell them that they can do more with less. If we tell them we are cutting the headcount, they will pay us less,” Mr Hong said.

One client that has grasped this “less is more” concept is Changi Airport, which coincidentally received a record score in the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore results.

The airport’s “outcomes” based approach to service doesn’t dictate how many people is needed for a particular task, as long as their requirements are met, said Mr Hong.

Certis Cisco officers perform passenger, baggage and other checks at the airport. The company recently had its contract with Changi Airport renewed for another five years to 2018.