

# Customers can help shape the kind of service they get

CUSTOMERS have more control than they believe over how their dining and travelling experiences turn out, say industry leaders at a recent forum organised by the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University (ISES).

But that power is not best wielded by showing displeasure to service staff in order to wrangle discounts and this may in fact prove counter-productive to building a stronger service culture in Singapore.

"I think sometimes customers are being very harsh, perhaps because of who they are or what they do, the stress levels," says Christophe Megel, a third generation chef from France who now heads the At-Sunrice Global-Chef Academy in Singapore as its executive director.

He recounts an incident that took place when he was working at a Ritz-Carlton hotel: a customer came to him to complain about the lack of strawberries at the buffet. "Before I could say anything, she was screaming at me," he said, giving him no chance to explain that as it was December, strawberries were not in season.

"We have a role to play as customers too to build a service culture. It's that interaction," he says.

To Chef Megel, this means simple things such as a "good morning", "please" and "thank you" to the old



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**Mr Chia:** *'Rewarding customers who offer constructive criticism is incredibly important'*. FILE PHOTOS

man working at the petrol station, which can make serving that much more pleasant.

This is not impossible, as the Singaporean customer is often quite adaptable, observes Christina Siaw, chief executive officer of the Singapore Cruise Centre.

"The same customers can behave

quite differently in different countries," she notes. "When Singaporeans go to Australia, we don't wave our hands wildly for service. We know instinctively that this waiter serves my table and this quadrant of the restaurant; I shall wait for him to place my order, ask for the bill. But in Singapore, we turn into different peo-

ple; we wave wildly, we intercept any service staff, including the dishwasher coming around to clear plates, to say: "Can I have my bill now?"

"I think we are all changing, not just the service industry but also the people being served," she laughs.

Edward Chia, co-founder and managing director of the Timbre Group,

says: "There is bad customer service, but there are also bad customers. The old saying that 'The customer is always right'? Sometimes I don't quite agree with that."

He sees the need to protect his employees as well, and not encourage customers who are unnecessarily hostile towards his service staff. "They are doing a very tough job and they need to be treated with respect," he says.

However, there is much that businesses can do to promote a wider service culture that customers are a part of. Timbre does so by rewarding customers who offer constructive criticism. "It's incredibly important. Last week, I sent across a \$150 voucher to a customer who gave a really good suggestion on how we could improve our iPad menus," he says.

"We see it as part of the process of encouraging customer ownership over feedback, get them to take the position that 'I'm not going to crucify you, I'm going to tell you what I think and give you a chance'. And then we can implement changes and encourage them to come back again. I think that's the kind of behaviour we want to reinforce," Mr Chia says.

In the same vein, service-oriented businesses need to have a plan for responding to disgruntled customers who turn to Facebook and Twitter as convenient megaphones for their rants.

Mr Chia says Timbre's strategy is to resist the instinct to delete negative comments on its Facebook page, for instance. "If a customer is public with his comments, we need to be public with our response too. But we do need to try to take it out of the public domain to understand details and resolve the matter."

After all, most potential patrons are savvier and more discerning than to believe hook, line and sinker every unverified negative comment or story they hear online.

Ms Siaw points out: "I use social media and travel media a lot when I plan my travels. Consumers will look at the complaint, look at the response and judge the situation fairly. In the service industry, sometimes there are slip-ups, so as long as the complaint is left public and addressed properly and professionally by the service provider, we take it as par for the course too."

While the explosive nature of social media means handling feedback over such channels is more challenging than feedback delivered in person or by e-mail, it has not changed the fundamental relationship between service provider and consumer.

"At the end of the day, what most people want . . . is just to be heard, for their concerns to be addressed. Social media today amplifies that, but I don't think it has changed the way people want to be treated," says Mr Chia.