

CHATROOM | MARCUS LEE

Complaints about service can be positive

If consumers are unwilling to give feedback, businesses will never learn

By GOH CHIN LIAN

EIGHT years into promoting good customer service here, service staff still fall below expectations in going beyond the call of duty, a recent poll of 300 local residents for the Go the Extra Mile for Service (Gems) Up campaign found.

Dr Marcus Lee, 43, academic director of the Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence (ISES), weighs in on why 56 per cent of locals took this view and yet, separately, 60 per cent of tourists who were also polled felt service staff performed above expectations.

■ *Why do local customers feel service staff fall below their expectations, but not tourists?*

When you're on holiday, you are relaxed and not in a rush. The protocol for service transactions is also different in the home country compared to Singapore.

Here, at McDonald's, it's so efficient. You say: "Fillet-O-Fish. Upsized. Green Tea." That's it.

In Canada, where I lived for 10 years, you go: "Hi", the other person goes: "Hi". "How are you?" "I'm fine. What can I do for you?"

Then you start your order. You speak in complete sentences. Societal norms enforce or expect this kind of pleasantries.

Service is a two-way street: I'm pleasant to you; you're pleasant to me. It sets up a nice experience.

In Singapore, the need for efficiency is ingrained. When we interact with service workers, it's very efficient, to the point, to minimise the time taken. It does not set the situation up for the possibility of delight most of the time.

Having said this, it's the wrong thing for companies to want to have a strategy of delight. Going the extra mile implies that the standard offering does not meet customers' requirement. If the service worker has to do this every day, it means the company is selling the wrong thing. Being all things to all people doesn't work.

■ *What more can be done to improve service levels?*

All stakeholders are interdependent. What the Government does at the policy level affects the busi-

ness environment. The changing expectations of global consumers, including locals who travel extensively, affect their views of the minimum level of service.

For a company to always think that they can do things in the same manner is unrealistic.

Gems Up is trying to move the entire landscape. It's a multi-pronged approach. The Singapore Tourism Board focuses on promoting the industry; the Workforce Development Agency, training requirements; Spring Singapore, helping companies reinvent themselves to be more customer-centric. We (ISES) look at research.

It's very difficult to move Singapore because everybody has to move, or needs to want to move.

Businesses say: "It's the Government's problem because they tightened the labour laws."

If consumers are not willing to give feedback, businesses will never learn. Like many Singaporeans, if I don't like the food, and the waiter asks while I'm eating: "How's the food?" I'll say: "Wonderful." I'm non-confrontational. I feel it's not worth my time. I don't want to make it uncomfortable. I just want to get out of there and not come back.

In the United States' national satisfaction study, 25 per cent of the respondents said they have complained to a company directly. In Singapore, it's about 5 per cent. The US satisfaction score is at least five or six points higher than ours. They are doing much better and their complaint rates are so high.

One of the inhibitors to improving engagement, feedback and customer satisfaction is that a lot of companies use the number of complaints as a negative key performance indicator (KPI). If I'm a service worker or a manager, and someone wants to complain, I will try to sweep it under the rug because it will affect my performance: Let me appease you. You go away. No official complaint. But the organisation never learns.

A positive KPI, such as complaint-handling ability, encourages a service worker to want to listen to your feedback, to tell the company what you brought up, and what he did for you. The company might call and ask how you rate the handling of the complaint. The worker gets remunerat-



Dr Marcus Lee says one of the inhibitors to improving feedback and customer satisfaction is that a lot of companies use the number of complaints as a negative key performance indicator. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

“ NO ROOM FOR DELIGHT

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ed. It's a reinforcing cycle.

■ *Will tipping help?*

It's not clear. There was a lot of tipping in Singapore. Then in the 1970s, they stopped, and started a no-tipping day. Businesses liked it and came up with their own (service charge). This 10 per cent service charge is not mandated. It became an industry norm. The money doesn't go to the Government. It doesn't necessarily go to the service staff. It goes to the businesses. The issue now is that the front-line workers' compensation is not linked to the performance. So peo-

ple say: "Let me tip."

If tomorrow all businesses reduce prices by 10 per cent and let the consumer decide if they want to give that 10 per cent to their service staff, I will love tipping.

But what's going to happen is that tomorrow, prices are going to be the same and they say: "We encourage you to tip."

(Businesses) are going to increase their internal cost. In an American diner or small restaurant, even if there's no free-flow coffee, waiters give it to you on the house because they want a larger tip. The business will absorb the costs. The worker's work-

ing in his best interest, not necessarily in the business's interest.

There's going to be differentiated service between rich and poor. I look at your shoes. You look like you will tip a lot, so spend a lot of time on you. Another person, in slippers, bare minimum.

The good thing about a standard service charge is we don't get differentiated treatment.

■ *What's your experience of service here – the good, the bad and the ugly?*

Consistency of service is difficult to ensure. Our son fell ill and we had to stay in hospital for about a week. Almost every hour, someone came in to make sure everything is okay. At 1am, 2am, 3am, the same thing happens. Your comfort level is solely dependent on how customer-focused the nurse is. Some nurses come in quietly, and because it's dark, they turn on a torchlight and shield it, so that the child doesn't wake up, and then they go out.

Others open the door, turn on the light, check and go out without turning off the light, at 3am! It's difficult to ensure all your people live and breathe the values that your company espouses.

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