



Twelve per cent of survey respondents said they did not complain about poor service because they felt there was 'no point', while some felt it was 'too difficult'. BLOOMBERG

Unhappy about service, but they won't say a word

The hiccups just kept coming: An interminable wait for drinks despite plenty of staff standing around; an appeal for utensils that went unanswered — the group eventually helped themselves to cutlery at a nearby counter.

And, at the end of what was meant to be a night of good food and drink, the group of 10 discovered that the restaurant's staff had thrown away the leftovers of the birthday cake they had brought, without their permission.

But although a complaint to the management would not have been unreasonable at this point, Ms Ng Bing and her friends chose to keep their grievances to themselves.

"We were so fed up with the service (but) we don't want to spoil the mood ... it was our friend's birthday," said Mrs Ng, 41, a housewife. "Next time, we won't go (there) any more."

Mrs Ng's behaviour is not atypical. According to findings by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES), the number of people who actually lodged complaints about poor service at food and beverage (F&B) outlets was smaller than the number of people who indicated that they had reasons to do so.

The findings were part of a survey conducted to derive the Customer Satisfaction Index for the F&B and

tourism sectors, which was published last month. Some 8,968 responses were collected for the survey, of which 4,993 were for the F&B sector.

This year's satisfaction levels for the F&B sector came in at 67.7 points out of 100, largely unchanged from last year.

The survey found that just two out of 100 respondents had made complaints to F&B outlets about service.

But, when probed further, 12 per cent of the respondents who did not make a complaint said it was because they felt there was "no point" in doing so and not because they had no reason to, while some felt it was "too difficult".

WHY THEY KEEP SILENT

While a healthy eight out of 10 respondents indicated that they had no reason to complain about service, could service standards in Singapore improve further if customers were more forthcoming?

Undergraduate Geraldine Tan said she had once written to a Japanese restaurant, commenting on the difference in quantity and appearance between the dishes pictured in the menu and what had actually been served. The restaurant never responded.

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Ms Rebecca Lee
SURVEY RESPONDENT

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Mr Ivan Tan
SURVEY RESPONDENT

"I don't know who to direct (my) feedback to, I am afraid (that it) may be mishandled by the staff of the restaurant," the 24-year-old said.

Ms Shun Yun, a 25-year-old accountant, shares: "I heard that if you complain at a restaurant, they might spike your food."

Ms Agatha Lee, 18, a student, told of how a worker at a bubble tea shop shouted at her while taking her order. But she chose to put the unpleasant encounter behind her, as she thought it was a hassle to make a complaint and did not know how to contact the company to do so.

Others said they generally felt uncomfortable making complaints. "I find it pretty rude, like I'm interrupting them while they're working," said Ms Rebecca Lee, 21, a programme coordinator. "I feel like I'm giving them a hard time (at work)."

Mr Ivan Tan, who works in sales, said that he has resigned himself to what he feels is poor service in Singapore. "You just need to get used to it and just live with it. Complaints won't improve the situation," the 33-year-old said.

Dr Marcus Lee, Academic Director of ISES, pointed out that it is difficult for companies to improve if their customers are not willing to speak up

about their experiences.

"Having said that, if companies don't want to improve, then increasing the quantity and quality of the feedback they receive won't lead anywhere," he added.

FEEDBACK THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

As consumers turn to social media — such as food blogs, Facebook, Twitter and review sites like HungryGoWhere — to share their tales of woe, Dr Lee said businesses can glean "invaluable insights" and keep up with ever-changing expectations by engaging with their customers online and off.

"Remember that the effectiveness of the Internet in amplifying the reach of a single voice works as well for businesses as it does for individual consumers," he said.

Mr Sean Flynn, CEO of Brotzeit, said that honest feedback and constructive criticism from customers are always welcome and their managers are constantly seeking feedback from customers. "We are a very responsive company and, when we hear a good suggestion, we implement it immediately," he said.

At Sakae Sushi, customers can press buttons on a device at the counters to indicate how happy they are with their experience. Mr Douglas Foo, CEO of Apex-Pal, which manages the Sakae Sushi chain, explained: "Basically we use a very simple (way to find out) — one is a frown, a flat face and a smiley face. Of course, we hope to get a smiley face. But if we get a flat face or a frown, then we want to find out exactly where the gaps are." **AMANDA LEE**