

STEPS FOR A KINDER SINGAPORE

People matter more than trays

RICHARD HARTUNG



Take a look around Singapore, and there are plenty of gaps in service and graciousness where improvements could have a big impact in making the nation an even better place to live.

In restaurants, for example, the latest Customer Satisfaction Index from the Singapore Management University showed that tourists were “considerably less satisfied” with the service. Customer loyalty scores for tourists and locals alike took a turn for the worse, with all the scores in the Index falling.

Spats between neighbours are getting increasing attention, and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong even mentioned in his National Day Rally speech that “HDB neighbours on the same corridor quarrelling” is an issue to be addressed. And concerns about student behaviour in schools have increased, with several incidents escalating so far that students have even attacked teachers physically.

While there are still many acts of kindness, challenges like these highlight how much more can be done to make Singapore more livable. So what has become one of the biggest areas of focus to reverse these trends

and become a more gracious society?

Returning trays at hawker centres. At a time when working on neighbourliness or student relations or service or other behaviours might seem especially important, returning trays is constantly in the headlines as a key practice towards a better society.

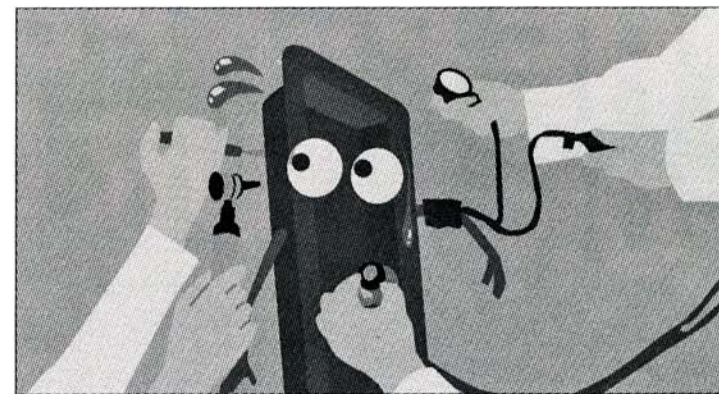
The National Environment Agency (NEA) plans to broadcast messages at hawker centres to remind patrons to return their trays, the Singapore Kindness Movement writes regularly about returning trays, and government ministers have even had discussions in Parliament about returning trays.

When there is so much else to be done, however, why focus so much on returning trays?

BENEFITS OF TRAY RETURNS

It is true that such a habit does have benefits. Hawker centres may indeed be cleaner, and birds are less likely to swoop down to feast on leftovers. The NEA says that returning trays is an act of graciousness towards cleaners, who can then make sure hawker centres are tidier by cleaning tables and collecting crockery.

Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Vivian Balakrishnan also commented that returning trays “reflects us, our values, our consideration for each other, our responsibility and stewardship of the environment,



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of our homes and the environment outside our homes”.

Ministries and companies are all putting plenty of support behind the initiative to return trays. Along with running campaigns and putting up signs, the NEA conducted surveys that counted 18,000 trays returned over a 20-day period in November, and is rolling out more programmes to support returning trays.

Food court owners and cleaning agencies, who may also increase productivity and reduce costs if customers return their own trays, are putting resources behind the initiative. And the media have supported the message with a plethora of stories.

SET PRIORITIES RIGHT TO GET BIGGER RESULTS

But while it’s nice to have cleaner hawker centres, shifting focus and re-

sources towards more important programmes could bring about greater benefits. Why not, for example, put more of these resources into current efforts to encourage kinder behaviour among neighbours.

Initiatives that lead to uncluttered corridors and enable residents to go home to peacefully quiet flats could make a bigger difference in peoples’ lives. Further initiatives to improve service quality at food and beverage outlets could boost Customer Satisfaction scores, diners’ happiness and tourist spending. Teaching staff to check orders for accuracy and offer service with a smile could be the start of major improvements.

Government agencies following through on PM Lee’s call to encourage residents to “do our best to be big-hearted to our neighbours, to our fellow citizens” could improve society more if they put more attention on how to encourage kindness in general than on encouraging tray returns.

That’s not to say that trays are unimportant. It’s just that competing priorities and busy lifestyles mean we need to prioritise those few activities that will give us the biggest bang for the buck, and accomplish the most in making this a kinder and gentler place to live.

● Richard Hartung is a consultant who has lived in Singapore since 1992.

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