

Improved 'in-store experience' at supermarkets sees customers coming back for more

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Serving up more than just groceries

SINGAPORE – Homemaker Wendy Ho, 31, was shopping for milk powder at NTUC FairPrice, hoping to buy enough tins to exchange for a gift. But the Clementi outlet was short on stock, leaving her one tin away from redeeming a child car seat.

But she need not have worried: A kind staff member offered to order new stock and reserve a tin of the milk powder for her. "She reserved a carton (of tinned milk) for me and even called me personally when the stock arrived," said the mother of three young girls. "Most stores will just tell me that they are out of stock."

While customers in the past might pick a supermarket based on price, convenience or quality of products, today's customers are also picking up on what sets a supermarket apart in terms of service.

According to the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) for the retail sector released earlier this month, satisfaction levels for service quality for supermarkets exceeded that of product quality for the first time in the index's seven-year history. The survey is done by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at Singapore Management University.

Satisfaction levels for supermarkets this year came in at 70 points — 3.1 per cent higher than last year — with FairPrice leading the charge with a score of 71.4 points.

And the improved scores can be attributed to supermarkets' new emphasis on the "in-store experience" — customers were happy with staff's familiarity with supermarket procedures, professionalism, product knowledge, as well as stores' product variety.

WHAT COUNTS AS GOOD SERVICE AT A SUPERMARKET?

"Organisation of products, friendly frontline staff, multiple modes of payments, loyalty points, cleanliness, location and 24-hour branches," summed up civil servant Cindy Chua, 28.

Over the past few years, supermarkets in Singapore have upped their game with numerous service-oriented initiatives, ranging from self-service queues to online shopping to new retail concepts, such as stores offering gourmet selections and others that stock bicycles and air-conditioners alongside the usual grocery suspects.

Creative Director Alvin Tan, 39, praised the 24-hour supermarket con-



It's service with a smile for the staff at NTUC FairPrice. PHOTO: NTUC FAIRPRICE

HOW THE SUPERMARKETS PERFORMED

	Score	Increase (in points)
Sub-sector	70.0	+2.1
NTUC FairPrice	71.4	+2.9
Cold Storage	69.5	+1.6
Sheng Siong	66.8	-0.2
Other supermarkets	66.3	+0.8

SOURCE: ISES

cept: "It is great for emergency late night grocery shopping if you've got an impromptu barbeque session or you want to cook up a supper."

He also likes the bring-your-own-bag check-out lanes available at selected FairPrice outlets. "I think it's the most effective way to encourage recycling. And it directly affects me because the queue is very short!" he said.

FairPrice's Green Rewards Scheme also gives customers a 10-cent rebate if they bring their own bags and spend a minimum of S\$10. This initiative saved the company 7 million plastic bags last year, said Mr Jonas Kor, Di-

What customers think makes a good supermarket

- Organisation of products
- Friendly frontline staff
- Multiple modes of payment
- Loyalty points
- Cleanliness
- Location
- 24-hour branches

rector of Corporate Communications for FairPrice.

The right attitude also scores points, noted Ms Linda Cheng, a 25-year-old manicurist, who commended the staff at FairPrice and Cold Storage supermarkets. "They are always smiling," she said. "And are very willing to bring you to the products you are looking for."

Customers also cited the importance of ambience and shopping environment. Ms Chua, for example, said she would not shop at Sheng Siong because of the "fishy" smell from the fresh seafood on display.

SUPERMARKETS SPEAK UP

Supermarkets TODAY spoke to recognised the constant need to innovate and improve the shopping experience. "Competition is never static and will only intensify," said FairPrice's Mr Kor.

To that end, FairPrice, Sheng Siong and Cold Storage have all been renovating their outlets for a more comfortable shopping experience.

Sheng Siong, which had the lowest score of the three supermarkets

named in the survey, said it has made an effort to "reduce the smell of seafood significantly and ensure cleaner and drier floors" since the brand stocks a wide array of fresh food offerings.

"We review each outlet's condition on a case-by-case basis, depending on the state of wear and tear of the equipment in-store, the rate of change in its surroundings and consumer demographics," said Sheng Siong Board Secretary Tan Ching Fern. The company recently closed the Teban Gardens and Ang Mo Kio supermarkets for renovation.

Cold Storage makes an effort to hire staff who speak good English to facilitate communication with customers. Similar to FairPrice, the company has also installed self-checkout machines at several of its outlets.

FairPrice said these machines have been gaining popularity. FairPrice Xtra at AMKHub, for example, showed an increase of about 25 per cent of self-checkout transactions a year after the machines were installed. The pack leader is also engaging its customers through various feedback channels, including social media and market surveys.

"Our Facebook page, which has over 78,000 fans, has been a good source of feedback. My own Facebook friends are another source of feedback," said NTUC FairPrice CEO Seah Kian Peng.

STAFF AS A BRAND

All three supermarkets have a significant proportion of older workers among its frontline staff. Cold Storage said that about 40 per cent of its staff are above 40, while Sheng Siong said 40 per cent of its staff are over 45. FairPrice said more than half of its workforce are aged 45 and above, with 450 above 60 years old.

"Customers may like to approach our older workers for advice or tips on food or promotions, (there could be) public perception (that) the younger ones tend to be more inexperienced in household matters," said Sheng Siong's Ms Tan.

FairPrice noted that these older staff mentor and guide the younger ones. "These employees are valuable assets as they contribute their wealth of experience, skills and wisdom to the workplace," Mr Kor said.

"In fact, many of our mature staff have become long-serving employees who are familiar faces and friends to our customers."

Such familiarity breeds better service as well. "If our staff sees a customer often, they may even offer friendly tips voluntarily, such as recommending the best buys of the week, or recipes to prepare something different for the customer's family," said Ms Tan.