



Greater respect for individuals toiling at the front line might shift perceptions of the nature of their profession. TODAY FILE PHOTO

Higher service standards begin with the customer

FROM KWAN JIN YAO

In reference to the commentary “Hard truths for S’pore’s service culture” (May 28), it is tempting to castigate those in the hospitality industry for poor service standards, despite the strides made in recent years.

Yet, the responsibility of customers for higher service standards here is often neglected. One could argue that greater respect for individuals toiling at the front line might shift perceptions of the nature of their profession.

Mere comparisons with other countries will not do. As stated in the commentary, it has been pointed out that fresh graduates shun the industry because they think the work is beneath them.

This perhaps signals entrenched prejudices against those in the industry and could, to some extent, explain why the criticisms persist.

The current evidence seems to run contrary to these criticisms. In 2013, the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore was at its highest since the survey started in 2007.

Some critics point to the Degree of Customer Orientation indicator in the World Economic Forum’s competitiveness index, stating that Singapore has not fared well vis-a-vis the other indicators. Yet, the country’s latest score is 5.5 out of a possible seven.

In other words, most companies and their staff are responsive to customers and, consequently, seek customer retention. In this vein, the perspectives that service staff have of their customers could be more revealing, since the aforementioned studies are general views in the other direction.

How do Singaporean customers differ from those around the world?

Do their expectations change as they travel abroad?

What was the toughest or most disrespectful episode that service staff had to handle? How would they rate their customers, based on their interactions and idiosyncrasies?

What other problems do service staff deal with, beyond the long hours and disproportionate remuneration? For instance, from a human resource standpoint, are employees empowered by development programmes

or given the requisite guidance from their employers?

Mr David Leo posits in his commentary: “The honesty in accepting that service levels are not good enough marks the first step towards building a strong service culture.”

It could further be argued that getting customers and employers to acknowledge their complicity marks another step. That is not to say that all service staff are blameless; however, the shaping of culture and perceptions

will take time.

A few years ago, train commuters were urged to be more considerate, to keep left on escalators and to queue on the platforms — to no avail? Over time, mindsets have shifted, with the realisation that there is greater convenience too.

If we, as consumers, hold ourselves to higher standards, treating service staff with the same respect and interactions we expect, then a better service culture is not far away.

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