

What if customer is not always right?

What disgruntled customers want is reasonable answers to their concerns. With the growth in e-Feedback platforms (for example Google review, Facebook Business Review, TripAdvisor and Booking.com) and e-Feedback apps (Mopinion, Apptentive, AppStark and Doorbell), customer relationship management should be enhanced and effective. Accordingly, there is an expectation that through such platforms, customers can express their thoughts and business operations can defend their constraints. However, the success of customer relationship management depends significantly on the extent to which customers provide equitable feedback and businesses provide sensible replies. Thus, should any party abuse e-Feedback platforms as a channel to unleash their unhappiness, the customer-operator relationship would be rendered problematic.

A study of more than 100 customer complaints from Google review, Facebook Business Review, TripAdvisor and Booking.com, focusing largely on hospitality-related services (restaurants and hotels), was conducted and the findings categorised under “five most ridiculous customer complaints”. The intention was to contextualise the findings to reflect on current unacceptable customer complaint behaviour in relation to service failure.

CATEGORY 1: JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS

Sometimes, customers jump to conclusions before fully unfolding the issue. Prejudging a service failure may not only be seen as unfair to the service provider but it could also break the trust between the two parties.

A guy orders a pizza and has it delivered to his house. It arrives on time, just as promised. Yet, when he opens the box, he is instantly unhappy because it isn't what he had ordered. There are no toppings, cheese or sauce. It is just bread. The disgruntled customer hits Twitter to complain and the pizza company apologises for the mistake, although it has not made one. The customer had opened the pizza box the wrong way.

CATEGORY 2: COMMON SENSE

Common understanding makes consumers assume that



RESPONSIBLE FEEDBACK

DR DANIEL CHONG
SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY
SUNWAY UNIVERSITY

certain requests are generally understood with partial (or even without) specifications. Sadly, service providers are the ones that are usually blamed when customers miscommunicate their requests.

A man visits a restaurant with his family on Thanksgiving. He sits down, points at his glass of ice water and screams ‘ice’ at the server. The server nods with the understanding that the customer is right — there is ice in his water. The man continues to point and holler ‘ice’. The server finally learns from the man’s wife that what he wants is a glass of plain ice. When the kind-hearted server returns, the man berates him for not having read his mind.

CATEGORY 3: MICRO-CUSTOMISATION

It is widely believed that future consumers will be hard to satisfy as they will have considerable individual and inimitable preferences for products and services. Thus, marketers believe a certain degree of customisation is crucial, especially for hospitality products and services. The question is, to what extent can customisation ensure a balance between efficiency and effectiveness?

A guest orders spaghetti and then complains about it to the server. When asked what is wrong, the man says it tastes great and the portion size is perfect but the spaghetti is too long. He wants shorter spaghetti, something like chicken soup noodles.

CATEGORY 4: SEATING PREFERENCE

“Please wait to be seated” signs are becoming ubiquitous in restaurants these days. This approach may improve the impression of service at the restaurant but it could also signal, “you can now choose your desired dining space or arrangement”. However, due to the design, layout and space limitations of restaurants, accommodating guests’ desirable seating preferences can be very challenging.

A woman walks into a teppanyaki-themed restaurant, which has a huge open kitchen in the middle of the dining area. She refuses to sit next to the cooking station because she cannot tolerate the smell of cooking and the noise of the exhaust fan from the open kitchen.

The hostess does her level-best to accommodate the woman, although most of the tables and dining counters are right next to the cooking station. The staff then seat her next to the entrance.

CATEGORY 5: WHAT IS ENOUGH INFORMATION?

“Why didn’t you tell me that?” To what extent are customers provided with enough information so that they do not feel providers are intentionally misrepresenting their products and services? Business operators should reasonably illustrate their product or service information. However, in practice, telling the whole story may not be feasible because of word count, design, cost and space limitations in product labelling and advertisements. Thus, if a customer is overly demanding or relies on the “only stated” information, the following problems could arise.

We booked an excursion to a water park but no one told us we had to bring our own swimsuits and towels. We assumed these would be included in the price.

Although the brochure said there was a fully equipped kitchen, there was no egg slicer in the drawers.

I was bitten by a mosquito. The brochure did not mention mosquitoes.

We found the sand was not like the sand in the brochure. Your brochure shows the sand as white but it was more yellow.

Consequently, e-Feedback platforms or any other online social networks are considered the new complaints channel for hospitality businesses to conveniently and effectively gather customer feedback. However, online social networks may also create a more comfortable way for some customers to vent their frustrations remotely. So, treating customers’ online feedback like they are always right can be self-destructive to hospitality operators. This is because service providers are not omnipotent and most hospitality businesses operate with limited resources, including time, funds and energy. Thus, to ensure customer dissatisfaction is heard and acted upon, customers should act reasonably and responsibly with regard to their complaints. **E**