



**GET CLOSER**  
By removing counters, which formed a barrier between customers and staff, M1 is able to provide service with a greater human touch

# AT YOUR SERVICE

SMES can only succeed by differentiating themselves through offering services of the highest quality

**I**N an increasingly competitive business environment, companies can thrive only if they pursue service excellence as a core business strategy. While this may require an overhaul in business design and service delivery, increased customer satisfaction invariably pays for itself. Customers of today are certainly more demanding. An increasingly integrated global market has brought about a profusion of choices, while growing connectivity puts ever more information in the hands of consumers. Simultaneously, customers increasingly demand personalised services while manpower constraints continue to tighten.

Faced with such a multitude of challenges, local companies can only succeed by differentiating themselves through offering services of the highest quality.

Spring – with support from agencies such as the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) – has been the driver behind the Customer-Centric Initiative (CCI), which aims to help local companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), upgrade their service capabilities.

Launched in 2005, the initiative came about amid concern over stagnating service standards in Singapore. At two-thirds of gross domestic product and three-quarters of total employment, the services sector's importance to the Singapore economy is undeniable. Its decline thus prompted a comprehensive series of programmes, including the CCI, to improve local service stands.

Tong Shuh Lan, director of business and service excellence at Spring, explains: "CCI in its early years focused mainly on developing a service culture, setting service standards and up-skilling of service skills through employee training." The programme has evolved with the times. In light of the labour

crunch and more demanding customers, Spring realised that a more holistic approach was required, in line with today's service landscape.

Says Ms Tong: "CCI now focuses on helping companies redesign and integrate their service processes to be more effective and efficient." This entails providing financial and technical assistance for companies looking to embark on service transformation projects. SMEs in particular can receive funding of up to 70 per cent of eligible costs. The figure is 50 per cent for non-SMEs.

To date, Spring has supported over 430 projects, benefiting more than 370 companies. According to the CCI Impact Study, conducted in 2012/2013 by the National University of Singapore, CCI projects have increased customer satisfaction by 20 per cent for companies in the retail and F&B sectors.

The impact on companies' books is also clear, with revenue and profit increasing by 29 per cent and 32 per cent respectively. This is hardly surprising. "Better customer experiences translate to positive word-of-mouth, reputation, greater wallet-share and hence stronger business performance," says Ms Tong.

However, she is quick to point out that service excellence involves more than greets, smiles and thanks – affectionately acronymed as GST. "While these are still relevant, companies increasingly need to adopt innovative service practices . . . and involve the customer to co-create the service experience amidst the manpower constraints and rising consumer expectations." This can be as simple as automating manual, laborious processes or can involve more radical changes.

The Changi Airport Group, for instance, installed touchscreen feedback systems at washrooms, check-in counters and other areas in the airport, allowing it to collect feedback from visitors

without expending excessive manpower. Telco M1 went as far as to do away with service counters in its shops. Instead, staff now stand by the customer's side, serving them on a tablet computer. By removing counters, which formed a barrier between customers and staff, M1 is able to provide service with a greater human touch.

Managing expectations of customers is equally important. Says Ms Tong: "An organisation may feel that it has delivered good service to customers, but if expectations are not matched with the perceived value received, then customer satisfaction will be affected."

While CCI targets large-scale projects, SMEs with smaller-scale plans can tap into the Innovation and Capability Vouchers. Each voucher is valued at S\$5,000, and each SME is eligible for up to eight vouchers. Additionally, Spring provides an online Customer Service Toolkit, an interactive lesson package, that can help equip service professionals with the foundations of delivering good service.

As firms work towards service excellence, involving the customer is a key priority. In order for customers to enjoy more personalised service, they would need to participate as co-creators of services. Companies can facilitate this process by creating opportunities for self-service, or by reaching out to customers through electronic and mobile-commerce.

"Many companies are often afraid to 'trouble' their customers. In reality, many customers today, especially the tech savvy generation, are more than happy to take charge of their own experience," says Ms Tong.

Service excellence, therefore, requires customers and companies alike to change their mindset. The services sector has little choice, given the pressures that it is facing. But seize the opportunity in the crisis, and a brighter future will yet be possible. ■

# WHAT CHIROPRACTORS HAVE LEARNT FROM DISNEY

Working with the Disney Institute, Chiropractic First developed a system to ensure a consistently high standard of service delivery across all its outlets and staff

INSTITUTING a framework for service excellence can be backbreaking work, but Chiropractic First found its load greatly lightened with assistance from the Disney Institute.

As a business development consultancy that grew out of the Walt Disney Company, the Disney Institute is universally recognised for its expertise in service excellence. Matt Kan, founder and chief executive officer of Chiropractic First, had long admired the institution from afar. "Their purpose, procedures and process are very well-aligned, and I saw it as something that we needed to do," says Dr Kan.

The process, though, turned out to be challenging. "We tried to implement it ourselves, but we fell short because we just didn't have enough people," says Dr Kan, of the four-man team put together to lead the change. He was thus overjoyed when he found out that consultancy services from the Disney Institute was eligible for subsidies under the Customer Centric Initiative (CCI).

Working with the Disney Institute, Chiropractic First developed a system to ensure a consistently high standard of service delivery across all its outlets and staff.

Says Vivien Yip, chief operating officer at Chiropractic First: "One of the outcomes that the staff found very useful

was the service pledge, where (Disney Institute) helped us to identify the top four important things in terms of service, in order of importance."

For Chiropractic First, this is safety, care, wellness and efficiency, in that order. The pledge is meant to help staff make decisions consistent with the company's service priorities.



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

# WHEN TECHNOLOGY MEETS TRADITION

Malay fine-dining restaurant Mamanda mechanised its kitchen while retaining the authenticity of its meals

IT may seem that technology has no place in a cultural dining experience. Malay fine-dining restaurant Mamanda, however, has found that going high-tech has only enhanced the authenticity of its meals. Mamanda takes its name from the term that sultans of yore used to address their ministers. The set-up of the restaurant, therefore, is meant to evoke the charm of a royal past. That it serves food prepared sous-vide using vacuum pack machines therefore seems almost blasphemous.

That too was the opinion of Zulkarnine Hafiz, director of Mamanda. Since he upgraded the kitchen though, he has not looked back.

Today, Mamanda kitchen is filled with the latest in cooking technology, which has

**NECESSARY COSTS**  
Mr Zulkarnine says that costs incurred for better customer service will pay for themselves

PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

allowed it to dramatically increase its efficiency. With the use of potato-peeling machines, for example, the process of peeling one gunny sack of potatoes has been reduced from hours to three minutes.

Similarly, the time taken for briyani rice, from cleaning to preparation, was shortened from five hours to 45 minutes with the use of combi-ovens, a machine that is part convection oven and part steam cooker. Briyani rice presented a particular challenge as a large amount of burnt rice becomes stuck to the pot during the traditional cooking process. This was not only difficult to clean, but also extremely wasteful. With a combi-oven, rice crusts ceased to form, saving significant time and money.

Productivity gains did not come at a compromise on the quality of food. Quite the contrary, in fact. "In order for us to retain the authenticity, the colour must be right, the taste must be there, the texture and the aroma as well," Mr Zulkarnine explains. "We have done a lot of R&D. We had to change some of the processes but we have retained the colour, taste, texture, and aroma."

With staff now freed to handle other activities, the restaurant now makes its flavourings from scratch. Staff are also able to pay greater attention to the food that is being prepared, since they are no longer stretched to their limits. This allows them to prepare dishes that are far superior in quality, says Mr Zulkarnine.

Guided by these values, employees are also empowered to make decisions. When staff face a wheelchair-bound customer, for example, they exercise the service pledge by escorting the customer out of the building and getting a cab for them. This may delay the completion of their other duties, but they clearly know the right thing to do since care comes before efficiency in the service pledge.

This also means that customers do not have to wait as long for the decision-making process to work its way through the management's hierarchy. "We try to bring decision-making to the lowest level possible. This is something that is not easily managed and delivered, because a lot of people are afraid to make decisions," says Dr Kan.

The crux lies in providing employees with comprehensive guidelines. Where the guidelines fall short, staff can now be guided by the service pledge.

With the assistance of the Disney Institute, Chiropractic First has retrained its employees to operate on this new paradigm. It has also developed a curriculum for use in its very own training academy.

As the company is rapidly expanding – it expects to double its clinic count to over 40 by the end of next year -- it is working to put in place a standardised training facility for new employees.

Since completing its CCI project in September 2012, the company has seen waiting time at its clinics fall from 20 to 15 minutes. Its mystery customer audit scores also improved from an already impressive 4.82 to 5.10 out of six.

Ms Yip is quick to point out that service excellence is a continuous process. Even as the company works on the academy curriculum, it conducts weekly refresher sessions.

Says Dr Kan: "I need to create an organisation that will last for the next 100 to 500 years. It has to be an institution with systems, people, values and culture." ■

Technology has also made its way to the front-end of the restaurant. A challenge that Mamanda faced was the amount of time that staff spent waiting for diners to decide on their order.

"Because the customers are not sure about the kind of cuisine that we serve . . . it can take 15 to 20 minutes," says Mr Zulkarnine. During this time, waiters had to walk to and fro, answering questions about the items on the menu, which was tedious and time-consuming.

Mamanda's solution was to digitise its menu. Using a tablet, customers are able to browse the descriptions of individual dishes before ordering. A waiter then confirms the order, advising diners on the correct portion sizes and the pairing of food. This ensures that the menu matches the diners' needs.

While technology has worked wonders in the restaurant, it certainly did not come cheap. Upgrading both the front-end and back-end of the operations cost the restaurant S\$350,000, of which Spring Singapore contributed about S\$100,000 under the Customer-Centric Initiative.

But the additional costs are necessary, says Mr Zulkarnine. After all, with better customer service, Mamanda can now enjoy higher revenue. It goes to show that costs incurred for better customer service pay for themselves. ■

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