

6th International Research Symposium in Service Management, IRSSM-6 2015, 11-15 August
2015, UiTM Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

Improving the Service Operations of Fast-food Restaurants

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Abstract

In the food industry, it is important for an organization to leverage their customer's satisfaction and this can be achieved through superior customer service. The goals of this study were to investigate the causes and problems faced by the selected restaurant and to provide suggestions on how to improve the slow customer service based on the numerous domains of operations management. A local restaurant in Kuching (Malaysia) was selected for the case study. Slow customer service has been identified as the main problem. The causes of this problem were identified and classified into four categories which involved people, environment, equipment/materials and method/procedure. This study also offered ways to improve its operational performance and overcome the problem of poor service operations. The alternatives offered include (1) Quality Function Development which helped in determining what will satisfy the customers and where to put the quality effort, (2) Total Quality Management (TQM), (3) process focus which uses service blueprint to strengthen the interaction between customers and the restaurant, (4) layout, (5) human resource management, (6) practice of good supply chain management, and (7) maintenance to get the most benefits and trouble-free services out of the restaurant equipment by performing regular maintenance. This paper hopes to provide relevant insights for service quality and customer satisfaction improvement for restaurant service operations.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak

Keywords: operational performance; customer service; customer satisfaction; quality function development; supply chain

1. Introduction

Operations in the service sector might be slightly different from the operations in the manufacturer sector which produces a tangible product. Service is the economic activities that typically produce intangible products such as repair and maintenance, government, food and lodging, transportation and insurance services. Food service outlets

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are facilities that serve meals and snacks for immediate consumption on site. In fact, commercial food service establishments accounted for bulk food-away-from-home. This category includes full-service restaurants, fast food outlets, caterers, some cafeterias, and other places that prepare, serve, and sell food to the general public for a profit.

There are some characteristics of food service that make it unique compared to production of other products. This uniqueness influences decisions that are made about production and service delivery. The first characteristic is the demand for food occurs at peak times, around breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals. Between these peak demand times, there are slow times. Secondly, demand for food may vary depending on the time of the year and competitive events, and production must be modified accordingly. Food production and service are labour intensive in which both skilled and unskilled labour are needed. Food is perishable, requiring it to be handled properly before, during, and after preparation. In addition, menus may be changed on a daily basis and therefore production may change daily. These characteristics create challenges in scheduling employees and production which may lead to difficulty in staffing, and high labour and food costs.

In the food industry, it is crucial for restaurants to achieve high level of customer satisfaction and this can be achieved through superior customer service. Undoubtedly, the success of a restaurant business depends on superior service quality, value and customer's satisfaction (Chow et al., 2007). Good customer service creates experiences that can meet customer expectations. It produces satisfied customers. Bad customer service causes disappointments and generates complaints. It can result in lost sales, because consumers most probably will switch to the competitors. Good customer service involves developing good bonding with customers, hopefully leading to good and long term relationships. It creates advantages for both customers and the business alike. Customers benefit because the business is providing a service that meets their needs.

2. Problems

SCR Corporation, a local family-run restaurant, has been used as the subject to study the service operations. It has many franchises that are located at several places in Sarawak, Malaysia. With the increasing number of customers, it is crucial for SCR to have an excellent operational performance. SCR Desa is highly populated with university students and residents from the nearby housing areas as it is one of the main choices for them to dine there. However, SCR Desa faces customer service problem that affects the image of SCR. This problem is obviously shown during peak hours when there are many people who come for lunch. The slow customer service is related to the slow food delivery to the customers' tables and less friendly customer service.

3. Causes of problems

3.1. Management

Insufficient number of staff in this restaurant is one of the major causes of the problem. The workers sometimes can be seen rushing when taking orders from one table to another. At the kitchen, the kitchen staff are working very hard to get the orders processed as fast as possible, but it is hard to do so if there are only a few staff are doing the work. This will affect their work performance and contribute to the slow service.

Some workers are not well-trained in their job. They are not trained to greet the customers, take the orders from the customers properly to meet their demands, and deliver the food to the customers on time. Cashiers need training as well because they have to know how to handle the cash machine and generate the customers' bill efficiently and effectively.

There is also a supervisor who does not fully supervise the workers. As a consequence, the workers do their daily work without putting their service quality as a priority. For instance, the kitchen staff need to be monitored in terms of the hygiene standards, good code of conduct and they should always wear kitchen uniforms. There was a case in which the chicken served to the customer was not fresh and was half-cooked. When preparing the food, they neglected the customers' order or do not arrange the orders properly. This was the main reason why customers who had arrived earlier were served later but those who came late were served earlier.

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