

Effects of Handling Customers' Complaints at Kumasi Technical University's Restaurant, Kumasi

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Abstract *The study was to examine the effects of handling customer complaints at Kumasi Technical University's restaurant. The study adopted a descriptive research design and a purposive sampling technique in which seven participants were selected for the study. Four research questions were raised to guide the study. The instrument for the data collection was a structured interview guide which was in two parts. There was an interview guide for workers (employees) and the management committee to collect data for study. The qualitative data collected was analysed using content analysis.*

The study revealed that the workers at the KsTU restaurant perceived their customers as people of high reputation and deserve their attention for service. It was also found out that customer complaints had placed more demand on the workers. The workers have to work extra hard in meeting those demands though it has not caused any of the staff to lose her work over the years. The study showed that the management committees mostly have the patience to sit with the workers in handling complaints that came to their attention. The last but not least finding was that customer complaints has helped in effective operation of the restaurant since their clientele basis had not declined over the years but had rather seen an increase demand of restaurant services.

Keywords: *Effects, Handling, Customer, Complaints, Restaurant*

INTRODUCTION

Services are tailored to the benefit of others and most often attracts a fee from the consumer(s). In the case of restaurant, food and beverages among others are made available to consumers to enjoy by providing cash for such services. The intent is to provide such services which should have been provided at home. The Ghanaian culture is changing perhaps quickly to reflect global modernity of 'white colour' job workers. Time is becoming a scarce commodity to come by for people in towns and cities.

It is in line with this bane that restaurant service in a way has reduced time lost in the process of meeting the demands of each passing day by cooking or going home for food. Restaurant service may not be without any challenge so far as man and society aspire to advance the gains made in previous years and channelling a new cause in life.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The main goal of any establishment is to provide services to its clientele base to be satisfied with its products or services.

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Customers always may wish that there is an improvement on whatever service or products they access from service providers. This therefore, leads to varied complaints which may be formal or informal to the restaurant management or perhaps through the workers to make the necessary changes in their services or products.

Clients visiting restaurants may vow not to patronise a particular restaurant anymore due to the reception or services received there and the opposite may be the case. The aim of any restaurant operator is make a return from the services provided and this meaning the restaurant has to retain its clients and even attract more clients so to maximize profit.

Complaints are filed or made by customers through whatever means with the motive of getting value for money spent at the restaurant. Handling complaints may have positive or negative effects on the employees and the management staff of the restaurant. The focus of this study was to assess the employees' perception of customers and effects of complaints on restaurant operations at KsTU.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do employees perceive their customers?
- What are the effects of customer complaints on employees?
- How does restaurant management handle customer complaints?
- What are the effects of customer complaints on the restaurant's operations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception of Employees about Their Customers

Purohit and Purohit (2013) have noted that customer satisfaction was the perception of the customers of how a firm has performed and this helps to analyse the degree of variation required to satisfy the customers in terms of the services. Purohit and Purohit (2013) in their study found that customer loyalty is the outcome of customer delights hence the need of every firm to work towards successful operation. Customers want to enjoy the value of their money therefore customers may have emotional attachment to the source of their satisfaction, in this case restaurant.

Singh (1991) have identified customers' satisfaction to be a factor employees dwell on to determine how their satisfaction is affected by the establishment. This in turn may cause them to display positive behaviours towards the establishment. According to Donovan and Hocutt (2001),

customer oriented behaviours were found to be positively related to customer satisfaction with the service received as well as customer commitment to the firm. So far as a customer feels satisfied with the kind of service provided, the person would be on the lookout for that restaurant's affiliate when he/she is out of the jurisdiction of the mother company. Potential customers could come to the restaurants for their meals upon the recommendations of friends based on what they have experienced sometime past.

Turkay and Sengul (2014) have identified peculiar behaviours such as politeness, cheerfulness and making customers feel special as some of the attributes that make customers feel appreciated and want to come over to that restaurant. We have associated positively with this finding in that it did reflect what we go through as customers in one way or the other in other restaurants. Customer satisfaction was seen as the function perceived service quality, product quality and price and it is measured by customer's overall judgment of the service received (Bei & Chiou, 2001). The point can be made that employees are one of the important factors that could make or unmake the proper functioning of a restaurant due to their attitude and behaviour towards customers.

Employees and customers have factors that affect their emotions and this could be a pointer to the clients' continuous coming to a restaurant or not. Wu and Shen (2013) have carried a study to investigate the veracity of this. According to the findings, waiter's emotional expression did not have any direct effect on customers' satisfaction. However, it may affect customers' satisfaction through customer-employee rapport. Also, rapport between customer and employee positively affects customer satisfaction. Rapport in restaurant operations is very necessary to attracting potential clients and it is in this vein that we are of total agreement of this finding. In the case of waiters' emotion being not adding anything tangible to their customers' satisfaction to some extent may be true. The reason being emotion has nothing relevant in contributing how a customer appreciates the service rented in the restaurant visited.

In the same finding of Wu and Shen (2013), customer's positive affections affect customer-employee rapport and customer satisfaction directly was another finding that has been found. Good rapport between customer and employee creates a better working atmosphere for the employees and customers becoming more attached to the restaurant which could help increase sales on daily basis.

How Management Handles Customer Complaints

Complaints by clients with respect to restaurant operations are not for any negative purpose but rather to help improve service delivery. Attitudes toward complaints

and self-efficacy have significant effects on the consumer complaints intention (Mukhtiar, Asmat, Arshad, Ali, Lodhi & Waqas, 2013). Attitude and its related issues to service delivery are very important to the success or otherwise of a restaurant. This is to intensify the consumers' attitude toward complaining in hospitality industry and the authors (Mukhtiar, Asmat, Arshad, Ali, Lodhi & Waqas, 2013) have recommended that service providers should encourage complaints from customers to help identify failures and shortcomings. When the shortcomings are properly handled, it would be a plus to the operations of the restaurant. Proper handling of complaints leads to making right policies to enhance the consumer satisfaction. The finding of Mukhtiar et al (2013) was of the fact that without pointing to the loop holes and inadequacies in services provided, there is no way management could evaluate how their services was doing. It takes the customers to help improve and perhaps introduce a better way of doing things.

Ombudsman Western Australia (2016) has identified ten principles for effective complaint handling system enabling complaints (Guidance should be provided to staff on how to respond to and prioritise complaints, Complaints should be acknowledged promptly, Complaints should be addressed promptly in order of urgency and staff should be aware of any target timelines for resolving complaints, Complaint Handling Officers should be empowered to either resolve complaints or be aware of, and have access to, the person who has the authority to do so,

Where appropriate, special arrangements for responding to particular client groups should be put in place, Staff should be able to identify matters that may be of public interest disclosures and refer them to the appropriate process). The focus was to guide how effectively organizations and establishments could go about in handling complaints with the aim of enhancing the services of the restaurant. The ten principles guide has chronological order of handling complaints through the employees to the management level at the restaurant.

Effects of Customer Complaints On Restaurant's Operations

Complaints from customers to their service providers are to help derive their benefits of money paid. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1975), attitude could be viewed in two different directions which examine how a person generally sees a specific behaviour, either negatively or positively, after assessing the results of an act. The complaints on employees and restaurant operations have its positive and negative effects as identified by theory of attitude (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975).

Findings showed that the probability to complain is controlled by gender as male complainers are more likely to show their dissatisfaction as compared to the female complainers supporting the previous works (Sujithamrak & Lam., 2005., An, Hui, & Leung, 2001; Liu & McClure, 2007 cited in Preko & Agbanu, 2015). Research has established that even some satisfied customers may still complain in order to provide useful feedback to product/service providers on service quality (Liu, Kang, Bai & Zhang, 2006). This is to help shape the services delivered at the point of sale. Human by nature always wants improvement in the services received each day probably.

Hotel and restaurant managers concern a lot about customer satisfaction to survive and for growth purpose in the industry. From the revenue point of view, customer satisfaction is very important for hotels (Barlow, 1996). Higher level of customer satisfaction comes from meeting the expectations of customers. But the problem is that it is very difficult to know about the expectations of customers unless they provide feedback to hotel managements. Feedback can be in different forms in different situations, but feedback in the form of complaints is very productive and beneficial source to make customer's satisfied (Sanes, 1993).

METHODOLOGY

The general approach adopted to guide the entire study has been described in this section of the paper. The area includes research design, instrumentation, participants, data collection procedure and how the data collected was analysed.

Research Design

Descriptive research design was adopted for the study. We intend to examine how workers perceive their clients and the effects of handling customer complaints at the restaurant. In this study, the prevailing situation in the Kumasi Technical University (KTU) restaurant was observed without manipulating any variable. This design was considered to be the most appropriate for the study since the researchers intend reporting the situation as it existed on the field.

Instrumentation

The instruments used for the data collection were two sets of interview guides with each having five sections. The interview guides were designed for employees and the management of the restaurant. The instruments were open-ended items with each having 14 items. Facial validation of the instruments was ensured by giving them to other colleagues to review. The review was to ensure content validity of the items before using it to collect the data.

Participants and Data Collection

The participants involved in this study were the employees (workers) and the managerial staff of the restaurant. A total of seven respondents (six employees & one managerial staff) were purposively selected to take part in the study (Tables 1 and 2). Assurance was given to the employees and the managerial staff of the protection of their personal identity and all information given was for research purposes only.

All the employees (workers) and the managerial staff were interviewed at their convenience so as not to disrupt their working hours. In view of this, no worker was interviewed during the peak hours of the restaurant but rather the managerial staff.

Table 1: Age of Respondents

Names of respondents	Ages of respondents
Victoria	35
Evelyn	29
Thelma	32
Gifty	30
Harrietta	34
Joyce	38
John (managerial staff)	36

Table 2: Years of Employment at the University (KsTU)

Names of respondents	No. Of Years at the university
Victoria	10
Evelyn	3
Thelma	7
Gifty	5
Harrietta	8
Joyce	10
John (managerial staff)	9

Data Analysis

The data for the study was purely a qualitative hence much statistical tools were not employed except frequency and percentage to analyse the biographical data. Qualitative data was analysed using constant comparative method (Shenton, 2004). The researchers developed a list of thematic codes and sub-codes for themes and sub-themes which were derived from the transcribed data. The four research questions were answered using the themes that emerged from the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Biographical Information about the Respondents

All the workers in KsTU have been interviewed and each interview section lasted about twenty minutes on the average. There were six females that work in KsTU restaurant for a number of years (Fig. 1). The workers have been with the establishment for some years now. The least number of years a worker has been working with the restaurant was three years while the person with the longest number of years was ten years (Fig. 2). The age of the workers ranged from 28years to 38years. One of the management committee members being male was interviewed. The age of the interviewee was 36years. He has been serving on the committee for six years. Out of the six workers, four of them served at the kitchen and two at the front-line of the restaurant.

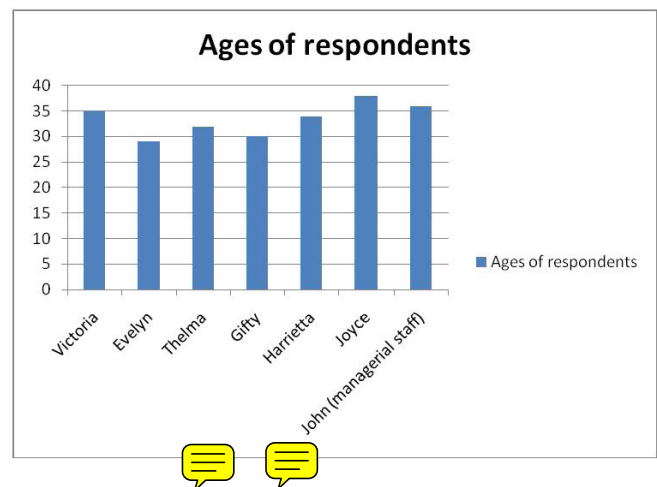


Fig. 1: Ages of Respondents

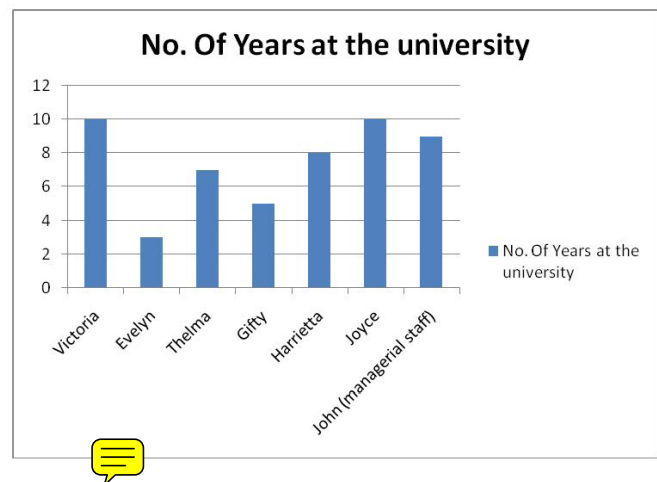


Fig. 2: Number of Years at the University

The workers (restaurant staff & academic staff) were government employees hence were being paid by the State through the Controller and Accountant General's Department on behalf of the government.

Perception of Employees about Their Customers

According to the workers, they regard their customers as people that deserved their attention for that matter for services rendered at the restaurant. One of the workers said '.....they were there with their monies for a service so they deserve attention from them.' It was revealed that their regular clientele base was the Staff of KsTU, students and the general public in the catchment area of the restaurant. In view of this, three of the restaurant staff revealed that it has imposed a lot of demands on their services because of the volume of request. The workers noted that because of the calibre of clients they receive, they accord them with much respect and high regards. A worker remarked that '... our clients deserved a lot of attention because they brought their monies for a service and without a satisfactory service, they would not come again so they have to deliver the best services to them.' Another worker said, '.... anybody that steps foot into their premises were given the best of customer care'.

All of the workers through the interview made it known that they never gave preferential treatment to any of their clients because of any material or other gains they might have received from them. However, the exception was drawn by one of the workers that 'the Vice-chancellor, Pro-vice and other academic board members had first attention from them during occasions like matriculation and graduation ceremonies.

Also, another worker made it known that some of their clients do call for food reservation in advance before coming. When those clients came for their packages and customers were there before them, the earlier clients do get infuriated at times thinking they were giving preferential treatment to such customers. Aside this, their service is on first-come-first-serve. This revelation on seemingly preferential treatment of some customers was attested to by the management committee member that it does not happen. In view of the small number of workers, it becomes so noticeable when a lot of people come to the restaurant at any given point in time and everybody wanted to be attended to.

It can be concluded based on the result that all the clients of KsTU restaurant were seen to be important clients and that needed the attention of the workers for a service. This finding was in line with Singh (1991) and; Donovan and Hocutt (2001) that customers need to be valued and appreciated through the services they received from restaurants. The

workers at the restaurant were there to provide service in terms of food and drinks. Without the customers, the workers have no business being there and would not get their daily bread from the service they render. Perception of a personality would definitely culminate into actions that would be exhibited towards a client.

Turkay and Sengul (2014) have indentified some peculiar behaviour that could be demonstrated towards customers. The creation of rapport is the key to drawing more customers to KsTU restaurant on daily or weekly basis. Every customer would prefer to be treated with outmost respect and this would make them go back to a particular restaurant again or never again. For workers to exhibit the trait of love and smile has a lot to do with how a worker perceived his/her customer. Positive perception of workers has a lot to do with how customers could be maintained and the negative perception regarding a customer would drive them away.

Effects of Customer Complaints on Employees

Customer complaints are for unsatisfied delivery of service or treatment received from a service provider. The six workers mentioned that they do receive a lot of complaints from their customer and this assertion was corroborated by the management committee member. The complaints were: 'too much salt', 'too much pepper', 'food not tasty', only one particular food always being on the menu and delay in serving clients. Five of the clients have agreed on these kinds of complaints being received often from their clients but one person disagreed to delay in serving their clients. Her reason was, '....some of the clients preferred a particular worker to serve them, and meanwhile that person was busy doing something else'. This does create a lot of back log of customers waiting to be served. The management committee representative said '....the delay of serving customers was due to the few number of workers'.

One of the workers made assertion that workers have to over work themselves to reduce delay in serving clients by packing most of the foods during special occasions. Also, another worker indicated that the use of out of date equipment at the kitchen contribute a lot to the delay in serving their clients. The frequent complaints from clients were known by the management and often times, they try to resolve them through a staff meeting. The meeting was usually between a worker at the restaurant and the management committee members. One of the workers revealed that the complaining by clients have been reducing due to prudent measures adopted by the workers and the management committee.

It was revealed by the management committee that complaints lodged have not caused any of the employees (workers) to lose her work. Although verbal cautions were

given at times, it has not made any worker to be sanctioned as made known by two of the workers. It was made known that the KsTU as an institution has code of ethics that would be applied to any staff that has fell foul of the code of ethics and discipline. Another worker noted that the complaints on 'delay in serving' food were due to few workers that have to meet a lot of demand from a large number of clients at a time.

Another measure the worker said they have adopted on much salt, pepper and food not tasty was to make sure every worker tastes the food to be assured that everything was well before food is served. According to one of the workers, since this measure was adopted, the complaints of the customers had reduced drastically. The result has shown that customers do lodge complaints about individual workers and the workers as a whole. None of the complaints had affected any worker to the extent of losing her work or sanction to affect her work output. However, complaints put them through emotional stress and extra work so that they meet their demands. Feedback according to Liu, Kang, Bai, and Zhang (2006) to help workers or service providers to improve upon the existing services or do new thing altogether. Barlow (1996) was of the view that customer satisfaction is very important to hotels and in this case, KTU restaurant.

The ultimate goal of a customer is perhaps to have a better service delivered and not collapse the business. In the case of KsTU it was clear that the numerous complaints to the workers and the management committee had eventually improved what used to exist in terms of too much pepper and salt issue.

How Management Handles Customer Complaints

One of the workers revealed that when a complaint comes to the attention of management committee, it was mostly not accepted in a friendly manner. Most at times, they do get angry over certain issues. The other five of the workers made it known that when a complaints are received by management, a meeting is called to address the issue. Workers are urged to sit up to avoid such complaints coming again. One of the respondents noted that the regular meetings between workers and the management committee has curtailed most of complaints they used to have from their customers. It was again revealed that complaints are mostly addressed through peer-to-peer and worker-to-management committee basis.

The approach of management committee in handling customer complaints was in consonance with Mukhtiar et al (2013). Without complaints from customers, the management committee might not have much information to help improve the services at the KsTU restaurant. In handling customer

complaints, it has to follow a principle or a methodology as identified in Ombudsman Western Australia (2016). The period meeting of the workers as mentioned by one of the respondents was the initiation of management committee to resolve customer complaints promptly and not necessarily a fault finding mission. The workers did confirm that after every meeting, they become one on many issues which would have otherwise degenerated into conflict.

Effects of Customer Complaints on the Restaurant Operations

Customers are said to be always right because they have their money to pay for a service. The interview with the workers had revealed that most of the complaints received over the years had helped to improve the services of the restaurant. For instance, the interview has indicated that the complaints on 'too much salt' and 'too much pepper' have been resolved through meetings among members of staff. This has made them to win the trust of the most of their clients.

Another positive effect derived according to the management committee Rep was the frequent complaints from clients has made their workers to sit up. This assertion was collaborated by two of the workers that have been interviewed. Another worker noted that they are working together on the menu and dishes to help eliminate about 95% of the complaints they receive on weekly basis. A lot of consultations are being done to curtail common mistakes that customers complain about.

On the other hand, one of the workers noted that complaints make them divided on most issues. One of the workers said, "...we try to point out who caused a problem and this creates animosity among themselves sometimes". Even though such animosity does not last or affect their work output in any way. It can be concluded that customer complaints help to improve upon service delivery in the restaurant to attract more clients. However, some of the complaints do get them divided on certain issues.

The finding has indicated that a lot more customers visit the KsTU restaurant on daily basis as a result of improvements that has taken place out of customer complaints. Barlow (1996) opined that customer complaints are always good to help improve services in hotel industry. In attaining a success in the restaurant, each person in the chain of work at the restaurant has to perform a specified task else a good result would not be realized. For instance, the kitchen staff, front-line staff and the management committee have their respective roles to play. Theoretically, their roles are segregated meanwhile when it comes to practice, everybody's role seem not be disjointed any more provided each person was doing was supposed to be done.

CONCLUSIONS

The customers were seen as a great asset to the workers and they do perceive them as such. The services provided in KsTU restaurant was not on any condition other than professional ethics. The customers receive their services without any preferential treatment from any worker. The service rendered was on first-come-first-serve basis though the Management and the Academic board were always served first on special occasions at KsTU.

Effects of customers' complaints handling seem to be good on the premise that when they are received by the Management, immediate steps are taken to address them. Calling for regular meetings was one of the means adapted to resolving such issue. The workers were not agitated on regular complaints coming from their customers but rather accepted them for the necessary corrective measures. Most of the complaints that had been received were being addressed and this was showing on their customer turn out on regular basis.

Although some of the customer complaints seem pointing to some particular workers, this had not divided their front especially on their performance at the restaurant. However, it had motivated them to overcome the issue of singling out a particular person for condemnation and perhaps sanction from the KsTU disciplinary committee.

The workers had resolved to work on the complaints as they stand for better results. The complaints do put a lot of strain on the workers to do more than necessary since the staff hand was few per the customer turn out. It was established that apart from emotional and physical challenges that the workers go through, it has not caused any of the workers to lose her work out of the customer complaints. Also, complaints on the restaurant staff did not affect the customer turn out to the restaurant.

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