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| Headline | Frontline staff not to blame | | |
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| Description | Frontline service staff- especially foreigners – feel more confident addressing customers in English after attending courses provided by SRA and SCIOB. | | |

LOWER CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Frontline staff not to blame

Service standards have gone up: SRA mystery shopping survey

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SINGAPORE – Brickbats fly at frontline service staff – especially foreigners – whenever customer satisfaction levels for the retail sector see a dip.

That's when Singapore Retailers Association (SRA) executive director Lau Chuen Wei finds herself speaking up for service workers.

"It is (frustrating)," she told MediaCorp. "If you understand the customer satisfaction index for what it is – that it encompasses value, quality and so on – it goes beyond the service staff. Certainly, the frontliners are not in a position to determine the price or quality of the product."

Singapore Management University's (SMU) third customer satisfaction study released last month showed a drop in the retail sector by 2.3 points.

Industry experts attributed the drop to customers' higher expectations, and the desire to get their money's worth in belt-tightening times. But it seems service standards are not to blame for diminished satisfaction.

The latest Retail Industry Mystery Shopping exercise commissioned by SRA shows service levels improving on all counts.

The half-yearly exercise solely evaluates service, based on attributes such as the staff's attitude, the assistance rendered and approach. The latter – based on the extent of eye contact and greeting of customers – improved by 13 points to 73, for instance.

The latest round of mystery shopping was conducted from May to July, and retailers involved included department stores, fashion outlets and electrical stores.

With the economic downturn, "retailers were probably better able to accommodate customer requests, and send their staff for training", said Mr Zack Bana, principal consultant of Beacon Consulting, the agency SRA engages for mystery shopping.

Training providers such as the SRA and the Singapore Chinese Chamber Institute of Business (SCCIOB) have reported steady numbers of staff – both local and foreign – being sent for training.

SRA's Service English for Retail Professionals programme



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has trained 204 staff since October 2008, of whom three-quarters were foreigners, said Ms Lau. The association also provides programmes to equip in-house trainers, and helps to assess employees' language competency.

The SCCIOB has trained about 100 staff since March through in-house corporate training and Workplace English courses, said its senior sales and marketing manager Chew Kheng Fui. Six in 10 attendees were foreigners.

Mr Cai Wen Jian (picture), a 24-year old sales assistant, said the SCCIOB's course boosted his confidence in addressing customers in English. The Shandong native sells mattresses at Jurong East mall IMM, and has been in Singapore for 15 months. "It was tough in the first six months. But now, my product knowledge is better, and clinching sales is routine," he said.

The course enabled 29-year-old Liaoning native Liu Wei to communicate better with his Malay colleagues and polish his customer interaction skills. He works in furniture rental company Lian Huat Leasing.

While such courses – which include some pointers on interpreting Singlish – will not make service staff fluent English speakers overnight, they highlight desirable service traits and encourage workers to speak more confidently, said Ms Lau.

Do the mystery shopping results contradict SMU's customer satisfaction findings?

No, said Ms Caroline Lim, director of SMU's Institute of Service Excellence. Rather, it shows service isn't the only driver of customer satisfaction.

For example, department stores' service quality has remained stable since 2007, but consumers are now less satisfied with them. This points to a disconnect in what the stores and their consumers deem ideal, she said.

The Institute recommended in its findings that companies channel resources towards handling customer complaints and damage control. Ms Lim urged companies to consistently meet customers' needs, like what airlines – whose satisfaction scores have gone up since 2007 – have done.