

**Analysis of the Factors that Influence Customer Satisfaction in Restaurants:
Layout, Ambiance, and More**

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INTRODUCTION

The moment customers set foot in a restaurant, they will begin making judgments about the establishment. The environment, including the ambiance of an establishment, will be incorporated into the level of satisfaction of each customer. Having satisfied customers will have a strong effect on decreasing the costs of the company, which is very beneficial for managers to create an even better foodservice establishment. There are many factors that customers use to help them decide if they will come back to an establishment or not, and if customers feel uncomfortable, the restaurant may not be very profitable. The manager controls the time and money spent on the layout, and the choices on this matter will affect the customer satisfaction, one of the outputs of the foodservice system. Foodservice managers should know about effective ambiances and layouts and the costs and benefits of applying these aspects to increase customer satisfaction and to decrease the overall costs in the system.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Personal Space and Seating Behavior

The Psychology behind Personal Space

Research supports the connection between personal space and comfort level. Concerning the study of food service management, most people would assume that managers only need to know the aspects of the food and some basics of developing a facility, but social psychology is very pertinent to be successful in this field.

Just like people from diverse cultures enjoy different tastes and spices, many people have different expectations about table layout distances. Customers who rate table location with high importance also have high satisfaction with private table locations (1). In general, most customers seek out a comfortable, yet interesting and secure environment. Many studies have been completed concerning the seating in institutional settings, classrooms, and mental health

clinics, but few studies have been done in service settings. However, some recent studies have shown the importance of personal space when designing restaurant layouts.

Once a manager understands a culture's typical personal space boundary, one can develop a layout for a restaurant that fit those norms and therefore have customers who want to come back (2). People from different cultures feel comfortable at varying distances from one another, or in other words, they have different personal space boundaries (2). Therefore, layout will affect the comfort level of the customers, which will encourage or discourage customers to attend a restaurant. For this reason, managers could increase customer satisfaction by learning about layout strategies.

Psychological traits, such as privacy preference and personal space, can be applied to the layout of tables in restaurants. Studies have shown that the actual architecture can influence social interaction. Furthermore, preferred personal space boundaries dictate seating behavior in restaurants or any institution. Providing a variety of seating locations will effectively provide comfort to as many customers as possible; the variety will also offer the highest chance to have their personal preference of privacy (2). Concerning configuration and location of seats, a study of college students presented that they chose anchored seats connected to a wall or window or other architectural feature to secure privacy when the dining situation was stressful (1). Thus, if a manager wants to develop a restaurant near a college town, it would be beneficial to design a dining room to create a comfortable atmosphere for this audience. Learning how to create a comfortable seating design in a restaurant can ultimately increase customer satisfaction.

Connection to Table Layout

Table management, training that a manager, hosts and hostesses should participate in, is an operational strategy that can reduce customer waiting times without costly expansion of the restaurant. For example, combinable tables offer flexibility for larger parties, so restaurants can

achieve higher seating occupancy. Hwang and Yoon (1) report in their study on table location preferences that people have a significant consensus to give high ratings to the tables with high privacy, good views, and those that are away from entrance areas, bathrooms, and the kitchen. Taking this into account, managers can provide the best customer satisfaction if tables with the following traits were given as much as possible: low traffic areas, against walls, or good views.

One last connection is the practice of differentiating pricing by location. Although some customers may be willing to pay more for the “better” table location, it should not be assumed that customers will pay more just because they are ushered to a quality spot. This may come across to the customers as an unfair practice, and should not be done, although it may have been a practice in the past. Rather, the custom is that the customer may tip the maitre d’ to ensure a good placement like greater privacy or a better view. When the customer is given good placement, the customer will most likely feel more satisfied and be more willing to come back to the establishment due to the quality service received.

The Role Music Plays

What Does Music Have To Do With It?

Whether loud or soft, music plays a role in ambiance. For example, music can create excitement or feelings of elegance and high class. Depending on the type of restaurant and ambiance a manager wants to create, the volume and type of music will vary. Upbeat music, that is audible to the customers, will be beneficial for restaurants that want to create a lively atmosphere. On the other hand, quiet, relaxing music or themed music would be better for more intimate settings (3). A fine dining restaurant will most likely benefit from music that is barely audible, yet comfortable. In this case, jazz music would be a better option than rock music. This is probably obvious to most managers, just from experience and exposure to other restaurants, but a quick review of the research on this topic would be beneficial.

With all of the options out there, should managers choose a programming service, commercial CD player, or a vintage juke box? Managers may also wonder about the effectiveness of a mixture of the three, and this decision will depend on the desired layout and theme of the restaurant. These aspects are important and can be learned easily by the Food Service Manager and be encompassed in any facility to improve the environment, without much cost. In summary, the type of music player is probably not the first priority when considering customer satisfaction, but the music choice and volume level will make an impact.

Paging Systems

Another aspect to consider is the paging system. Most professional sound systems allow for easy transition between music and a paging system. A loud, static-producing, and annoying paging system can easily ruin a comfortable atmosphere (3). It would be beneficial to purchase a high-quality system that is also easy to use. The environment is very important to customers' satisfaction, so paying attention to this detail is highly recommended. Music at the correct volume can offer relaxation and pleasant feelings to customers, but if it is not given, it is less likely for customers to want to come back again to an establishment (4). Static and annoying sounds will affect the overall perception of a restaurant, so avoiding low-quality sound systems could be the difference between satisfied or dissatisfied customers.

Setting the Right Ambiance: Lighting

DINESCAPE is a six-factor scale created to give restaurateurs a tool to improve customer satisfaction by comparing these factors at different locations of their own establishments (4). One of the six factors of DINESCAPE is lighting. Good lighting will make the appearance of the food more appetizing, and it can set different moods for your customers. The large variety of light sources helps designers achieve the desired impact, and this job is usually done by the designer alone. Managers would benefit to be involved in this process and have specifications

such as location of the electric panels, illumination level, brightness intensity, and ease of replacement of the lights so that future costs can be minimized (5). Remembering that lights are functional first, then aesthetic through balance, the cost of lighting fixtures can be determined from that perspective.

Different types of lighting can affect perception of food and how customers view everything in the restaurant, from the first moment they set foot inside an establishment. The appearance of food is a very important factor on how highly people rate food, so this aspect is important for a Food Service Manager to learn. Many factors contribute to a stressful environment, especially lighting, so learning about appropriate balance in lighting can help give customers an enjoyable experience. There is a lot to know about lighting, so further research is necessary before making these important decisions. Besides inappropriate lighting, long waiting times can negatively affect ambiance by contributing to a stressful environment.

Waiting Times

Make it Fast

Nobody likes to wait in long lines, especially if they are hungry. Food is as much a necessity to life as it is a way of pleasure and enjoyment for people. And even if the line is short, people also have a hard time if they waiting times exceed their expectations (6). Patrons may become restless and therefore think less of the restaurant's service. This will most likely lead to conversations with close friends and family about the disapproval of the experience, and therefore cause a decrease in sales for the restaurant. This may seem like common sense, but if a manager does not pay attention to this detail, the business will suffer due to low ratings. Different cultures have different expectations, but in any case, the faster the service—the happier the customer (as long as food quality is preserved). Prevention of unsatisfied customers due to

long waiting times is important, and is made possible through studies on traffic flows of restaurant seating.

How to Decrease Waiting Times

Studies on seating behavior demonstrate their results through diagrams that explain the best “traffic flows” to support a busy restaurant environment. This is also important in developing the layout of the tables, so managers can try to give as many customers as they can the most preferred spot in the house (4, 6). Managers can help customers be satisfied if they know about the psychology of seating behavior. Overall, the costs of a business will decrease if a manager can get customers to come back, and bring their friends back as well.

The best policy might be interactive with customer-arrival rate and party-size distribution (6). Four policies were analyzed for different sized parties, and the results were significant. The results depend on customer demand as well, or how busy the restaurant is. Overall, the Front-to-back and Out-In policies had the best results. The Random policy always had the longest waiting time, so it would be best to avoid this distribution, although it may be the easiest. An interesting point is that these policies have significant effects when the customer demand is low or moderate, but when restaurants are very busy, no policy won the shortest waiting time (6). This suggests that there comes a point where the capacity of the restaurant is reached and a manager can no longer regulate the tables in a time efficient way. During busy times, restaurateurs inevitably resort to give the next customer in line the next table that opens up, no matter the location. Not all aspects were studied, but future research can incorporate other factors such as the effect of reservations and customers’ willingness to wait.

COSTS AND BENEFITS ANALYSIS

First of all, starting up a new food service business is risky. The startup costs can be large, and if the company does not advertise well, they will not receive enough customers to

make a generous profit in the beginning. Many sources agree that success will be more likely if managers give some attention to the layout and ambiance of their restaurants. Learning about the aforementioned topics and noticing upcoming trends will also help managers make small changes that can have profitable outcomes. The risks and costs of purchasing good lighting, for example, will be outweighed by an increase in customer satisfaction, and then an increase in profitability by increasing sales.

Another way to decrease costs is to increase sales. When starting up a restaurant, one marketing tool to consider is coupons, and this proposes the following question: For what reasons do customers come back to an establishment? Do coupons actually work to bring new customers to attend once and to come again and again? A temporary coupon can help attract new customers, but research suggests that food and high service quality are better indicators of customers returning to a restaurant (7). A coupon can be compared to a reward rather than a marketing tool for returning customers, and is optional for increasing customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Constructing an ideal ambiance is a science and an art because of many reasons. Because managers will be dealing with materials and with people's perceptions, it is important to create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere for customers to be profitable. The aspects explained previously have been shown to have a large impact on customer satisfaction, but there are a few other topics that may also influence this output of the foodservice system. Authenticity may play a part, but when it comes to feeding customers quickly, the use of convenience foods is acceptable and authenticity becomes less important (8). Also, purchasing food that is already pre-cut, such as five-pound bags of chopped lettuce or sliced onions, can cut down on labor time, which also helps customers to be served earlier, further improving customer satisfaction (9). Another point in customer satisfaction, besides ambiance, is keeping up with food trends.

Managers will benefit if they keep up with food and design trends, by providing new and eye-catching material that will help customers feel excited. Also, if service staff dress standards are at the same level of the patrons, there will be a feeling of respect, rather than superiority or a lack of respect (10). Dress and appearance of service staff does play a role in customer satisfaction, so staying updated with staff clothing trends can promote customer approval.

When considering the cost and benefits of using a theme or authentic decorations in a restaurant, it is essential to be familiar with the background of expected patrons. It is best to avoid stereotypical artifacts that could be easily identified by customers familiar with the culture (8). The main reasons why customers go out to eat is to have an enjoyable time or just to enjoy tasty food. Therefore, the ratio of authentic decorations to imitations is to be decided by the manager's discretion, depending on the cost of the items as well as the expected benefit of each option. In most cases, patrons will be pleased with a "good show" or an enjoyable, believable experience, so this means that just a small portion of the budget needs to be spent on decorations.

Studies on seating behavior, layout, music, lighting, facility aesthetics, and waiting times all suggest that customer satisfaction will be affected by a foodservice manager's knowledge in these areas (4). The risks and benefits associated with implementing these concepts will differ for each restaurant, and careful analysis and observation of similar restaurants can help give managers an idea of how they should prepare their individual restaurant. If a foodservice manager wants to be successful, however, ambiance is something that should not be disregarded. Application of these principles and thoughtful planning can improve the outputs of the foodservice system, especially increasing customer satisfaction and decreasing overall costs.

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