Electronic meal experience: a gap analysis of online Cape Town restaurant comments

Osward Mhlanga
Walter Sisulu University,
East London, 5201, South Africa
E-mail:omhlanga@wsu.ac.za
+27 43 702 9225 (Office)

Abstract

This article presents a gap analysis of 1037 guest comments regarding ninety Cape Town restaurants on an online restaurant guide. The primary objective of this study was to determine the electronic meal experience in restaurants. In order to achieve the primary objective, the following secondary objectives were formulated, namely; to: (a) assess the meal experience in restaurants, (b) establish the significance of difference between perceived and expected service quality, (c) identify the number of dimensions for expectations and perceptions scales of modified DINESERV model and (d) draw conclusions to restaurant management regarding the meal experience in restaurants. The empirical research was conducted using primary data.

The questionnaire was based on Markovic, Raspor and Segaric's (2010) research. In order to meet survey goals, gap analysis was conducted. The empirical results show that perception scores were higher than expectation scores, which indicate high level of meal experience. The item with the highest gap was "the desirable level of noise" whilst the item with the lowest gap was "staff has food and beverage knowledge". However, most of the mean perception scores were more than the mean expectation scores giving an overall meal experience of 0.02.Therefore, restaurateurs should not underestimate electronic guest comments, but should continuously monitor and compare their guests' expectations and perceptions electronically, for the long-term sustainability of restaurants. Keeping track of comment patterns over long periods of time can also act as a key performance indicator for restaurants and enable restaurateurs to protect their brand online.

Key words: expectations, guest comments, meal experience, perceptions, restaurateurs

Source: http://www.reviewpro.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/wordle-reviews-550x346.jpg

INTRODUCTION

The meal experience refers to a series of tangible and intangible events a guest experiences when eating out (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008). It represents a moment in the everyday life of human beings (Makela, 2000) and individuals will have their own experiences of meals – whether they eat at home or in a restaurant (Warde & Martens, 2000:178). Any feelings guests may have when they arrive at the restaurant, and when they leave, should be taken into account and included as part of the total meal experience (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008). Although it is difficult to define exactly where the meal experience actually starts, and indeed ends, it is usually assumed that the main part of the experience begins when guests enter a restaurant and ends when they leave (Heung & Gu, 2012). Consequently, all events and activities before and after dining can generate total experience for guests (Jin, Lee & Huffman, 2010). Thus, the experience includes much more than simply eating (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008).

Payne-Palacio and Theis (2005) avers that in a restaurant context, service quality is the intangible (untouchable or inconsumable) aspect of the meal experience and a focused evaluation that reflects the customer's perception of specific dimensions of service. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) identified five dimensions of service that are of utmost importance in maximising customer satisfaction, namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Customer satisfaction is influenced by perceptions of service quality, product quality, and price as well as situational factors and personal factors. Choi and Chu (2001) considers satisfaction as an evaluation by customers that the food or service they have received is at least as good as it is supposed to be. Satisfaction may also be associated with feelings of pleasure for the meal experience that make the customer happy or feel good. Nonetheless, the underlying fact is that customer satisfaction is critically important, because it reflects subjective customer evaluations of the attribute performance associated with the meal experience (Namkung & Jang, 2008).

Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult to satisfy restaurant guests (Enz, 2004; Hu, 2009; Reynolds & Biel, 2007). Guests progressively demand higher quality food (Hu, 2009) and service (Quan & Wang, 2004) than before. No matter how good the service is or how well priced the menu may be, if the restaurant fails to deliver its primary product, the experience will be tainted, and subsequent comments will be negative (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). Consequently, the complexity and intricacies of guests' expectations, makes it difficult for a restaurateur to predict how each guest will react to a particular meal experience (Pantelidis, 2010a).

Guests not only require services provided at dining venues, but also expect a memorable experience (Thorn, 2003). Following a memorable meal experience, come positive word-of-mouth communication and guest satisfaction which are considered critical to the success of restaurant service (Ladhari, Brun & Morales, 2008). Guest satisfaction leads to positive behavioural intentions, such as return patronage or repeat purchase (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999a). While there is no guarantee of a satisfied guest's repeat business, it is almost certain that a dissatisfied guest will not return (Soriano, 2002; Crotts, Pan & Raschid, 2008). For this reason, a memorable meal experience can directly affect word-of-mouth communications which tend to shape pre-dining expectations and post-dining perceptions (Gersch, Hewing & Scholer, 2011).

Mueller, Palmer, Mack and McMullan (2003) spell out three disturbing facts or statistics regarding dissatisfied customers. One out of 26 unhappy customers complains, while the other 25 customers (96%) will more than likely simply take their business elsewhere (organisation-switching behaviour). However, when complaints are handled well, guests will return to the restaurant sometime in future. The importance of positive word of mouth to restaurants can be summarised by Yu and Dean (2001) who claim that it is more expensive to attract new customers than to retain existing ones since it costs about five times as much time, money and resources to attract new customers as it does to retain an existing customer (Mueller et al., 2003). Therefore, restaurant marketers should value word of mouth and attempt to influence it (Kimes & Sheryl, 2008).

However, word of mouth is not a commodity that can be manufactured and it is difficult to alter (Gelb, Betsy & Sundaram, 2002). Pantelidis (2010b) avers that word of mouth is a by-product of a solid restaurant that provides a great meal experience to guests; therefore, seeking to generate word of mouth without ensuring that the product on offer is of good

quality is an act of futility. With the rise of social media and online forums at various types, word of mouth has transcended the traditional format and has become critical element in many guests' patronage decision. Many guests now consult not only friends and relatives when they are seeking a restaurant, but they consult online guides and social media sites (Gelb *et al.*, 2002). The practice of passing a marketing message through online media has become known as 'electronic word of mouth' (Riedl, Konstan & Vrooman, 2002).

Camilo, Connolly, Daniel and Woo (2008) identified the failure to keep up with technological changes as a chief reason for the failure of restaurants. Kasavana (2002) posits that it is important to maintain an effective electronic marketing strategy, but the key is to effectively manage the restaurants' online brand. This is where working with social media and other sites is important to restaurants' electronic marketing strategies. Therefore, the rapid expansion of technological advancements, particularly those relating to the internet, provides an opportunity for restaurants to meet or exceed guests' expectations (Helm, 2000).

Pantelidis (2010a) asserts that while online restaurant review sites and social media reviews add to the existing complications for restaurant operators, they also can point to areas in need of improvement for restaurateurs who pay attention. Effective restaurant websites can contribute to a positive dining experience, as well as convince guests to patronise a restaurant (Kimes, 2008).Consequently, restaurateurs who fully comprehend the importance of interactivity on their websites as a tool of creating a loyal customer base will also understand the importance of tracking and monitoring guests' online reviews (Thorn, 2003).

However, they appear to be a void of empirical studies that investigate electronic word of mouth in restaurants. Therefore, this study examined guest-generated internet content, often called 'word of mouse', which has already become a critical element in guests' determination of whether to visit a restaurant (Gersch *et al.*, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is one of the largest industries globally. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2014) reports that the tourism industry contributed 9.5% to the global economy in 2013 and expects tourists to spend more per trip and stay longer on their holidays in 2014. Despite tough global economic conditions, the South African tourism industry reached a record of 9.6 million international tourist arrivals in 2013 (Statistics South Africa, 2013). Consequently, the sector's contribution to gross domestic product in South Africa has risen gradually from 8.1% in 2007 to 10.3% in 2013 (WTTC, 2014).

To maintain the large tourism arrivals, the industry should create loyal customers (WTTC, 2014). Loyal customers are less price sensitive than non loyal customers in the choice decision leading to repeat purchase and more income to the service provider (Puja & Yukti, 2011). A good quality service delights its customers and these delighted customers remain loyal and talk favourably to others about the services thereby attracting new customers which lead to reputation growth whilst minimising marketing efforts. Statistics shows that satisfied customers tend to be loyal customers and will tell three other customers, such as relatives, friends and workmates, about his or her meal experience (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2001). Conversely, one unhappy guest, on average, will tend to tell between 10 and 11 other people of a bad experience (Mueller *et al.*, 2003). Thus, a dissatisfied guest may not only go elsewhere, but will likely become an active champion to persuade others to go elsewhere as well – negative word-of-mouth behaviour.

Restaurants are classified as one of the category of fields within the hospitality industry that make up the tourism industry in South Africa (CATHSSETA, 2014). It is estimated that restaurants provided for 93 000 jobs in 2013, while the total income generated by restaurants was R1 728 million in September 2013 (SSA, 2013). It is therefore a modern day engine of economic growth (Matshediso, 2014).The growth in the restaurant industry over the past years can be attributed mainly to a change in the modern way of life (Moolman, 2011). Consumers are nowadays experiencing an increasing scarcity of time. As a result, consumers prefer to eat out rather than to spend their scarce time cooking meals at home (Dhurup, Mafini & Malan, 2013). This triggered a tendency to consume food away from home (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006).However, despite the increasing popularity of eating out (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006), the international failure rate for restaurants is considered to be higher than the average failure rate for small businesses.

Parsa, Self, Njite and King (2005) estimated that thirty per cent of restaurants fail during the first year of operation, although claims are made that it is closer to ninety per cent. Researchers (Soriano, 2002; Chi & Gursoy, 2009) identify low service quality as one of the main reasons for restaurant failure.

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) point out that good service quality leads to guest loyalty. Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991) found that the customers recommend a business to others willingly when they have received top quality service. Fornell, (1992) identified a relationship between high quality and high levels of consumer retention which leads to higher profits. Olsen (2002) reveal the connection between service quality, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) point out how good service quality leads to willingness to recommend and return. To summarise on the importance of service, Kharasch (1999) explains that great service can make up for a bad meal and can take a great meal and make it an experience so incredible that guests cannot wait to come back. To improve the meal experience in restaurants it is necessary to establish the significance of difference between perceived and expected service quality in restaurants (Brennan, 2013).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The restaurant industry in South Africa is undergoing a period of anaemic growth due to the after effects of the 2009 global economic recession (Forster, 2012). According to Statistics South Africa (2014), the average guest spent 28.3% of their food budget on restaurants in 2013 compared to 30.0% in 2003. Since the recession, industry growth has been subdued as guests seek more for their money when spending at restaurants (Brennan, 2013). Consequently, industry revenue declined 1.8% in 2013 as guests tightened their purse strings (Forster, 2012).

Researchers such as Pantelidis (2010b) and Khalilzadeh, Rajabi and Jahromi (2013), identify restaurateurs' inability to determine key dining variables guests consider in their online reviews as one of the main reasons for low guest turnout. Despite lowering their prices and spending marketing funds on promotions, restaurants seem to be finding great difficulty to ascertain the meal experience (Heung & Gu, 2012; Ryu, Lee & Kim, 2012). As such, a study to determine the key dining variables

guests consider in their online reviews in restaurants has been visualised. The results of the study could increase guest turnout and may provide a positive contribution to the body of knowledge and understanding of guest behaviour in relation to restaurant patronage.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The research questions were conceptualised by taking into account the concerns raised by restaurateurs, namely:

• Which key dining variables are important for the meal experience in restaurants?

• What are the differences between expectations and perceptions of guests in restaurants?

• What is the factor structure of the DINESERV model?

Based on the defined research questions, the primary objective of this study was to determine the key dining variables guests consider in their online reviews in restaurants in Cape Town. In order to achieve the primary objective, the following secondary objectives were formulated:

• To assess the meal experience in restaurants;

• To establish the significance of difference between perceived and expected service quality in restaurants;

• To identify the number of dimensions for expectations and perceptions scales of the DINESERV model; and

• To draw conclusions to restaurant management regarding the meal experience in restaurants.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, guest comments were analysed on the online Cape Town restaurant guide http://www.cape.town.diningguide.com, which listed 846 restaurants in Cape Town on its webpage. This restaurant guide was selected for two reasons. First, the guide features a seven point star rating system for guests' expectations and perceptions in

restaurants, making it easier to compare guests' expectations and perceptions and to also note negative comments. Second, this was one of the first online guides to attempt to ensure genuine reviews by asking reviewers for a valid email address or by having them register to post a review. Although this format can still be manipulated, it is much better than blogs and forums that allow the anonymous postings of inappropriately favoured comments.

Only formal full-service restaurants were targeted. For this study, a formal full-service restaurant refers to an up market restaurant that offers table service with complete, varied menus and multiple entrees for each meal period which may include soups, salads and/or desserts. Most formal full-service restaurants will provide customer seating with gastronomy, sophisticated service, elegant ambience and liquor service. Usually, these restaurants will not permit casual wear (Feinstein & Stefanelli, 2008).The researcher applied the Davis,Bernard, Lockwood, Pantelidis and Alcott (2008) classification of a formal full-service restaurant to include their fine dining and popular-catering categories. Furthermore, the selection criteria were that the restaurant either had an online presence so that the researcher could determine the style of service, or it had online articles that could serve the same purpose.

Only 150 restaurants complied with the selection criteria and 90 restaurants were randomly selected. The research sample included in the study entailed relevant data of 1037 comments that were collected from 90 formal full-service restaurants in Cape Town. With gap analysis, the researcher hoped to identify key dining factors that influence the meal experience and reflective commentaries and thus suggest the key values in guests' restaurant preference structure model.

A sample of 1037 was adequate, since the total population of formal full-service restaurant guests in Cape Town exceeds 5 000 guests (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). A descriptive quantitative study design was followed. Probability sampling was used since it is based on the principles of randomness and the probability theory, to accurately generalise to the population (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

In order to guarantee equal representation of each of the restaurants, proportional stratified random sampling was used to find the guest comments for a particular restaurant taking into cognisance the restaurant's seating capacity (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). A proportional sample of 22.5% of the total seating capacity per restaurant enabled the researcher to obtain 1037 guests' comments.

Systematic sampling, which is a probability sampling method, was then used to select guests' comments by systematically moving through the sample frame and selecting every kth comment. As such, guest comments were selected by systematically targeting every fourth comment per restaurant until the sample size of comments for a particular restaurant was reached (Maree, 2005).

It was better to target every fourth comment so as to be discreet (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999b).Guests' comments were collected in September, October, November and December 2014 during weekdays and weekends as recommended by various researchers (Akinyele, 2010; Kivela *et al.,* 1999b; Sulek & Hensley, 2004).Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences which is a statistical analysis software programme (SPSS, 2014).

FINDINGS

Reliability and Validity

Reliability in quantitative studies can be defined as the extent to which test scores are accurate, consistent or stable (Struwig & Stead, 2001). Taking into account that McMillan and Schumacher (2006) regard the Cronbach α coefficient as the most appropriate method to investigate the reliability of survey research where there is a range of possible answers and not only a choice between two items, internal reliability was tested using this measure. A Cronbach's α coefficient of higher than seven is acceptable (Pietersen & Maree, 2007). The Cronbach`s α coefficient for the total index was high (0.8201), while moderate to high reliability coefficients were calculated for food and beverage (0.8863), service quality (0.7951) and ambience (0.8067). The high alpha values indicate good internal consistency among the items.

Pietersen and Maree (2007) describe validity as the extent to which an empirical instrument "measures what it is supposed to measure". In order to ensure content and face validity (Babbie & Mouton, 2008), a literature study was undertaken and the online rating system

was scrutinised by academic and restaurant experts before the data was analysed.

Results and discussion

Table 1: Gender composition of the reviewers with the means and standard deviations.

Gender	n	%	Meal experience	
			Mean	**SD**
Male	448	43.20	6.37	0.82
Female	589	56.80	6.55	1.04

In this study, of the 1037 reviewers, 43.20% (n=448) were male whilst 56.80% (n=589) were female. Females had the highest meal experience (6.55).

Gap analysis of meal experience factors using online restaurant comments

Various authors (Susskind, 2002; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2002; Coye, 2004) posit that guests compare their perceptions with their expectations to determine their overall meal experience. As such, gap analysis was used to compare reviewers' perceptions with their expectations using online restaurant commentsto establish the meal experience.

In this view, Table 2 shows the results for the guests' expectations and perceptions of food and beverage, service quality and ambienceusing online restaurant comments. The table also reflects the means and standard deviations for food and beverage, service quality and ambience as well as the gaps and t-values for food and beverage, service quality and ambience.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for meal expectations and perceptions of food and beverages, service quality and ambiencementioned in commentaries on Cape Town-eating.co.za

	Attributes	Expectations		Perceptions		Meal experience (Gap)	t-value
		Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**		
	Food and beverages						
V1	Presentation of the food	6.79	1.26	6.83	0.56	0.04	1.09
V2	Combination of food on the plate	6.71	0.53	6.75	0.91	0.04	2.24
V3	Garnishing	6.68	0.81	6.79	0.88	0.11	1.17
V4	Colour of food	6.68	0.64	6.81	0.71	0.13	3.37
V5	Colour of beverages	6.73	0.83	6.77	0.81	0.04	2.78
V6	Smell or odour of food	6.70	0.68	6.73	0.61	0.03	1.81
V7	Smell or odour of beverages	6.59	0.57	6.68	0.73	0.09	3.53
V8	Taste of food	6.84	1.08	6.87	0.87	0.03	2.64
V9	Taste of beverages	6.79	0.71	6.81	0.86	0.02	1.75
V10	Texture of the food	6.51	0.60	6.53	0.78	0.02	3.95
V11	Temperature of food	6.79	0.59	6.73	0.68	-0.06	4.07
V12	Temperature of beverages	6.79	0.64	6.74	0.81	-0.05	2.29
V13	Variety of menu items	6.72	0.56	6.81	0.76	0.09	1.66
V14	Value for money	6.82	0.71	6.88	1.01	0.06	3.08
V15	Overall quality of food and beverages	6.67	1.05	6.79	0.64	0.12	3.47
	Service						
V16	Friendliness and politeness of staff	6.57	0.56	6.66	0.69	0.09	2.81
V17	Attentiveness of staff	6.63	0.62	6.49	0.71	-0.14	3.47
V18	Staff greeting guests	6.65	1.06	6.68	0.78	0.03	3.55
V19	Efficient service	6.79	0.84	6.61	0.71	-0.18	2.61
V20	Management presence	6.37	0.69	6.13	0.75	-0.24	2.21
V21	Staff have food and beverage knowledge	6.31	0.52	5.86	0.76	-0.45	7.11*
V22	Sympathetic handling of complaints	6.68	0.86	6.42	0.71	-0.26	4.58
V23	Overall quality of service	6.56	0.51	6.44	0.69	-0.12	3.67
	Ambience						
V24	Attractiveness of exterior	6.51	1.13	6.61	0.86	0.10	1.05

	appearance						
V25	Attractiveness of interior décor	6.69	0.68	6.83	0.75	0.14	2.34
V26	Subdued lighting	6.39	0.91	6.47	0.86	0.08	3.61
V27	Comfortable temperature	6.69	0.68	6.73	1.04	0.04	4.06
V28	Desirable level of noise	6.40	0.73	6.58	0.55	0.18	1.68
V29	Rational music	6.62	0.66	6.65	0.68	0.03	4.99
V30	Pleasant odours	6.37	0.83	6.48	0.76	0.11	3.26
V31	Spatial layout and functionality	6.28	0.72	6.51	0.68	0.23	2.81
V32	Effective signs, symbols and artefacts	6.29	0.66	6.43	0.71	0.14	4.61
V33	Overall quality of ambience	6.45	0.56	6.56	0.74	0.11	3.07
	Experience						
V34	Overall satisfaction with the meal experience	6.68	0.71	6.75	1.15	0.07	1.23
	Overall mean for 34 attributes	**6.61**	**0.74**	**6.63**	**0.77**	**0.02**	**-**

*V: Factor attribute; * t-test (2 tailed Significance.) p< 0.05; *SD: Standard deviation p<0.05

Meal expectations and perceptions were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale. An initial glance at the data reveals that the overall mean scores for expectations and perceptions items were 6.61 and 6.63 respectively, indicating rather high expectations and perceptions of restaurant guests regarding food and beverage, service quality and ambience (Markovic & Raspor, 2010).

A further investigation of Table 2 shows that guests' mean expectation scores ranged between 6.29 and 6.84. The item with the highest expectation score was the "taste of food" (V8). The results in this study reveal similarities to studies conducted by Zopiatis and Pribic (2007) who noted "taste of food" as the item with the highest expectation score.

Even though guests are seeking an experience at a restaurant, it is clear that the taste of food plays a pivotal role in formal full-service restaurants. It is the primary variable that will influence a guests' memory and subsequently his or her behavioural intentions – whether that includes returning or sharing reviews on various internet sites. No matter how good the service or how well priced the menu may be, if the restaurant fails to deliver its primary product, the experience will be tainted, and subsequent comments will be negative (Rong& Jun, 2012).

The item with the lowest expectation score was "spatial layout and functionality" (V31). The results reveal similarities to the findings by Lee and Hing (1995), who noted that the lowest expectation score was, for the item "spatial layout and functionality".
In the same vein of thought, guests' mean perception scores ranged between 5.86 (V21) and 6.88 (V14). The item with the highest perception score was; "value for money" (V14). The results in this study are similar to the

findings presented by Lee and Hing (1995) who concluded that in French fine dining restaurants the highest perception scores were; "taste of food" and "value for money". The item with the lowest perception score was; "staff have food and beverage knowledge" (V21). After investigating the expectation and perception scores on different restaurant attributes, a gap analysis was performed.

Gap analysis refers to the difference between the mean perception and the mean expectation score for each restaurant attribute. It indicates discrepancies between guests' perceptions and expectations (Nasution & Mavondo, 2008). The gap scores for each attribute were calculated by subtracting the expectation means from the perception means.

Positive scores show that perceptions were higher than expectations while negative scores show that perceptions were lower than expectations (Ha & Jang, 2010). A zero score implies that perceptions were equal to expectations. However, in this study, most of the mean perception scores were more than the mean expectation scores giving an overall gap of 0.02 for the entire 34 restaurant attributes which has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

The widest positive gap (0.18) was the "desirable level of noise" (V28) meaning that guests' expectations were far surpassed by guests' perceptions which causes guest satisfaction. The narrowest gap (0.02) was the "taste of beverages" (V9) and "texture of food" (V10) meaning that guests' expectations were almost met. Thus, guests did not have high expectations on the taste of beverages and the texture of food than they actually were which had a positive effect on guest satisfaction. The widest negative gap (-0.45) was the "staff have food and beverage knowledge" (V21) meaning

that guests expected restaurant staff to have more food and beverage knowledge than they actually had and this represents serious shortfalls which may cause guest dissatisfaction.

The effect of the widest negative gap might be a dissatisfying experience, with less return visits and negative word-of-mouth communications (Geissler & Rucks, 2011). Guests who are dissatisfied with a dining experience are likely to tell someone about that dining experience whether good or bad and may respond differently (Susskind, 2002). They may, for instance, act as follows: quietly exit, defect or switch to another restaurant, continue to patronise the restaurant even though their perception does not meet their expectations, never return to the same restaurant in future, or they can voice their concern to the manager in the hope of putting matters right on the spot (Susskind, 2002).

Furthermore, a comparison of guests' perceptions with their expectations of the 34 examined restaurant attributes, using the paired samples t-test, indicated that 33 restaurant attributes were not statistically significant meaning that these attributes do not require more attention in terms of making improvement efforts. Only one restaurant attributes the "staff have food and beverage knowledge" (V21) was statistically significant (Sig. 0.1602) meaning that this attribute requires more attention in terms of making improvement efforts.

In a nutshell, guests experienced more than they expected which has a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Guests typically hold certain desired expectations of restaurants. This represents ideal and normative expectations (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Ideal expectations are the level of service expectation that guests wish for. It is what the guest wants to happen. Conversely, normative expectations represent what guests ideally want and hope to receive from the service provider; it is what the guest believes should occur in a particular service encounter (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003).

The good news for restaurateurs is that the majority of online reviews examined in this article were generally positive, which means delivering a good product and service is often rewarded by guests in terms of word of mouse. In this research, the taste of food appeared as the top attribute for guests' expectations, followed by value for money.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there are a number of companies that can monitor a number of blogs, social sites and review sites for any restaurant, most restaurateurs noted that they did not have the budget to invest to a large company. Therefore, restaurateurs may use a Google alert, which is an easy way of getting emails based on selected topics and keywords (Riedl et al., 2002). Every time Google bots find a comment, article or review about a particular restaurant, restaurateurs can view it and choose whether to respond (Torres & Kline, 2006).

Since the widest negative gap (-0.45) was the attribute "staff have food and beverage knowledge" restaurateurs should place specific emphasis on the development of their waiters who are the front line employees. Frontline employees transfer most of the value of the restaurant product to the customers when they interact with the customer. Frontline employees are therefore responsible for the "moment of truth" or "critical fail point" when customers evaluate the restaurant as a whole. Consequently, attention needs to be paid on waiters' food and beverage knowledge (Namasivayam & Denizci, 2006:385, 391).

Such a strategy has two effects. First, it allows a restaurant to win back a dissatisfied guest, and second it allows a restaurant to stand out as one that will make it right if something goes wrong. Finally, if guests repeatedly offer positive comments about a particular aspect of the restaurant, this aspect can be used as a criterion for rewarding and further motivating employees. If on the other area, a particular area consistently receives negative comments, then the restaurateur can investigate the reasons behind this underperformance. Keeping track of comment patterns over long periods of time can also act as a key performance indicator for restaurateurs (Heung & Gu, 2012). When review sites operate a star rating system, a restaurateur can easily track his or her restaurant rating over periods of time (Camilo et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

Restaurateurs should not underestimate electronic guest comments, but should

continuously monitor and compare their guests' expectations and experiences levels for the long-term sustainability of the business. Not only can restaurateurs achieve a better understanding of what guests expect and how they perceive their restaurant, but guests' comments can also highlight areas of improvement and enable restaurateurs to protect their brand online. Restaurateurs should therefore focus on training waiters on food and beverage knowledge to gain and sustain a competitive advantage over other restaurant categories. Finally, the research supports the strategic objectives of the National Tourism Sector Strategy (RSA NDT, 2012) to deliver a world-class experience to guests.

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