By ALEXANDRA HO
(SINGAPORE) Beyond the basic greet, smile and thank paradigm for service standards here, Singapore Management University (SMU) has formulated a method to quantify something as intangible as service quality.

The SMU Service Quality Index aims to examine different aspects of service in various industries and pinpoint areas companies can improve on. Key to the index is an examination of five main dimensions — reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Reliability refers to a company’s ability to deliver its promised service; tangibles to the appearance of a company’s office, equipment and ambience; responsiveness could range from how quickly the company responds to its customer service hotline to its willingness to help customers; assurance, the employee’s ability to convey trust and confidence; and empathy, the delivery of caring, individualised attention to customers.

Of the five, SMU’s practice associate professor of marketing Thomas Tan stressed that reliability is the most important. “If there is no reliability, other aspects will not even matter,” he said.

To measure the aspects, Prof Tan said respondents will be presented a survey with about 50 statements, eight to 10 statements for each aspect. They can rate the statements, ranging from strongly agreeing to strongly disagreeing.

Beyond that, practice associate professor of management Raj Komaran said questions may be asked, such as on incidents respondents may have had. Specific examples, be they bouquets or brickbats, Prof Tan said, help companies better analyse critical incidents.

For a start, SMU intends to train the index on eight sectors — department stores, supermarkets, furniture, fashion apparel, jewellery, petrol kiosks, watches and clocks, and electronics.

The index is pitched at corporations, particularly management, keen on spotting service-quality loopholes so that changes can be made to improve the bottom line, said another researcher in the team, visiting associate professor of marketing, Sundar Bharadwaj.

“Providing good service quality drives satisfaction with a product,” he explained. “Satisfaction in turn will drive loyalty and then there will be the willingness to pay higher prices. The idea is from a customer level — you get the benefit of repeat purchase and higher volumes, and you grow with a customer in an organic manner.”

The survey for the index could involve interviews with 2,000 randomly selected local households. A thousand tourists could also be chosen, possibly interviewed at the airport.

Prof Komaran reckons 30 interviewers will be needed to complete the survey in two to three weeks. SMU could have the index running early next year and do it on an annual basis once funding, estimated at $300,000, is secured.

The government would logically be a good sponsor, Prof Komaran said. Otherwise, companies interested in improving service standards could also commission the study.

The professors feel the denigration of Singapore’s service quality is unfair. Their take is that surveys such as the World Economic Forum competitiveness survey, which rated Singapore’s customer orientation 21st last year, down from eighth in 1998, may have had too narrow a focus or asked too few questions, affecting the outcome.

SMU hopes to conduct service quality surveys of regional countries for a better basis of comparison.