Unhappy with service? 
For most, it’s ‘talk only, no action’

Poll shows only 6% of people here will lodge complaint; the rest prefer to whine

BY TESSA WONG

FROM kopi-swigging punters whingeing in coffee shops to armchair critics spewing diatribes on their blogs, casual griping is a beloved Singaporean pastime.

But does the average Joe here put his money where his mouth is?

Going by the findings of a recent national survey, no. The poll found that only 6 per cent of people here will lodge a formal complaint to seek redress, say, after experiencing below-par customer experiences.

The rest prefer to whine privately.

This “talk only, no action” trait contrasts with that of consumers elsewhere.

A similar poll in the United States, for instance, revealed that 14 per cent of Americans would file a complaint about poor treatment.

The results of the Singapore survey, called the Customer Satisfaction Index for Singapore, were released two weeks ago.

More than 12,000 people here, 17 per cent of whom were tourists, were polled in this first wide-ranging survey of customer satisfaction. Its results are being taken as an indicator of service standards.

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Sociologist Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies said Singaporeans prefer to indulge in “informal private whining, rather than formal complaining.”

Dr Chong added: “There is a line between complaining and whining. Lodging a formal complaint, he added, is regarded as a “stigmatised”, and Singaporeans, being non-confrontational, are conscious of “losing face”.

Dr Marcus Lee, academic director of the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University, which released the study, agreed.

He said: “I think Singaporeans do like to complain – but not to companies, just among themselves.”

This, he said, could come from the cultural mores that discourage people from calling attention to service lapses. Some respondents in a straw poll conducted by The Straits Times agreed.

Undergraduate Dionne Lau, 22, is one who would not file a formal complaint “because it is very troublesome” and because “I look bad, the staff look bad, so there’s no point”.

To mobile phone dealer Quek Kim Huat, 47, complaining takes too much time – and it may not even change anything.

You have to go and talk to the manager, fill in forms or write in suggestions. Sometimes, you don’t even know how effective your complaints will be. The best way would be just to not patronise them any more.

Mr Irwan Sahru, 32, an executive director of a non-profit organisation, said the impression was that Singaporeans complained a lot.

“I guess that is in our culture. We all tend to take things for granted and like to complain here and there because we expect things to be done a certain way.”

Consumer-rights vigilante Tan Geok Hoon, 43, who made the news in February for having won her David-versus-Goliath fight against mobile phone giant Nokia over a faulty cellphone, said many Singaporeans were unaware of their consumer rights.

Said the sales manager: “I also feel that we have very little consumer rights.”

The Government should do much more to promote good service and consumer rights. If it can do this, we can make Singapore into a more successful country.”