Is there a need for another star for service?

Focus on bad retailers instead; any scheme must be compulsory

BY LIN WEI CHEAN

Yet another decal has been launched in the name of good service.

The pink star symbol was introduced by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) early this month. The Board hopes tourists and locals alike will recognise the sign in shop windows as the hallmark of excellent service offered within.

The new accreditation programme has some 308 charter members from the retail, food and beverage and nightlife sectors. The aim is to hit 2,000 members in five years.

The STB said the new scheme was introduced because over 80 per cent of 1,000 tourists surveyed said service is more important than value-for-money and over 90 per cent of 2,000 foreigners asked indicated that they prefer to patronise accredited outlets.

Assistant Professor Marcus Lee, the academic director at Singapore Management University’s Institute of Service Excellence, said: “These schemes are especially beneficial for tourists in Singapore, who would be new to the local retail and F&B scene. The decals will help guide their choice of service provider.”

But do we need another new scheme to add to the alphabet soup mix of awards and recognition already given out in the name of service?

The following already exist: the annual Excellent Service Award (Exsa) given by Spring Singapore; the Singapore Retailers’ Association’s own Service Gems awards; and the Tourism Awards given out by the STB for good service. Yet, few locals and even fewer tourists are aware of what these different awards or programmes mean.

As Indonesian tourist Aya, who has been to Singapore many times, put it: “I have never noticed anything. Or if I do, I don’t know what they mean.”

Quite frequently, the decals are stuck on shop windows, sometimes just inches from the ground and hardly noticeable.

If we want to improve service standards, we should first tackle the problem of errant retailers who cheat tourists with over-priced goods. Certifying big brand chains for service standards which ought to be high in the first place will have a greater impact if general service standards are high.

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Some 840 tourists who came between January and October have lodged complaints with the STB about consumer electronics purchases. This year’s figures are some 15 per cent higher than for the same period last year.

Add to this the number who did not lodge a complaint because they do not know how to or find it inconvenient.

Instead of affixing a star to well-known companies like Tiffany & Co or Royal Sporting House, the authorities should perhaps focus on weeding out bad eggs like one store at Sim Lim Square which has been the subject of five tourist complaints since last June.

Singapore has a reputation overseas for being an electronics paradise. Tour guides urge tourists to head for Lucky Plaza or Sim Lim Square.

Nice.

But shops selling electronic products also lead the list of tourist complaints. The Consumers Association of Singapore received 30 cases of complaints from tourists between January and September, mainly about purchases of electrical and electronic products like mobile phones or watches. The top grouse is overcharging.

Australian Eddy Bryant, who was in town last year, paid $850 for an item that was retailing in most other shops for $400. He tried to complain to the STB but was told that since the suggested retail price was higher than the $850 he paid, there was nothing that could be done.

He said: “There are a few retailers around who know how to play the system and know that no action can be taken. It shows that they know how to dupe some tourists and get away with it.”

STB director of service quality Neeta Lachmandas said that those in the electronics sector are encouraged to differentiate themselves by taking part in the Singapore Service Star scheme. But how many will be willing to be persuaded? If the response to existing and earlier accreditation schemes are any indication, perhaps not many.

The Consumers Association of Singapore has accredited for fair business practices a total of 171 businesses and over 300 schools. But this scheme has been around for about 10 years.

There was also an earlier STB initiative that aimed to brand businesses for good service. It started in 1997. By 1999, the programme had a grand total of 10 retailers, five spas and seven travel agents as members. It soon lapsed.

Unless accreditation is made mandatory – the way hawker centre cleanliness ratings are – there is no way tourists will know for certain if a non-accredited shop is just unwilling to pay the annual membership fee for something it does not care to have, or is truly unable to meet the criteria for good service.

Accreditation schemes work only if they have bite.

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