Mr Govindaraj Subramaniam, who won STB award for Best Tourism Host, is a guest relations officer at the Fairmont Hotel.

TNP Picture: KELVIN CHNG

**Monster customers? NO PROBLEM**

He just gets himself a drink of water, says STPB’s Best Tourism Host winner

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T**hey are known as “monster customers”** They come to the hotel demanding an early check-in without wanting to pay more. Then, they want rooms with a harbour view. And if they have to wait a bit while you search for rooms in a heavily booked hotel, they start yelling at you. These are just some of the daily challenges faced by guest relations officer, Govindaraj Subramaniam, of the Fairmont Singapore. And he should know. He won the Singapore Tourism Board Best Tourism Host (Hotel) award earlier this month.

"Customers are becoming more demanding. They have seen more, experienced more, and nowadays, expect to be treated like gods," said Mr Govindaraj, who has been with the hotel for two years.

With Singapore turning into a major tourist destination, those at the frontline have to learn the knack of serving such customers. But it can take its toll.

**EMOTIONAL LABOUR**

The stress of forcing a smile and maintaining a cheery disposition in the face of demanding customers is becoming so much a part of the lives of workers that American sociologist Arlie Hochschild has coined a term for it: emotional labour.

Dr Richard Arvey, head of the department of management and organisation at the National University of Singapore Business School, said: "With the integrated resorts coming up, there will be higher expectations of service.

"We’re not adequately prepared to deal with these expectations, and people will become more stressed out trying to meet the long-term objective of the country to be a tourist spot."

Ms Caroline Lim, director of the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University, feels that one way to reduce stress is to allow staff to be more proactive and creative instead of making them abide by rules and regulations.

**MANAGEMENT SUPPORT**

Mr Andra Chew, operations manager at Charles & Keith, believes it is also necessary for management to support service staff. He said: "I do not want to put standard operating procedures in place, because it’s unnatural, and gives the customer a robotic experience, just like if you call up some companies and you get a recorded message."

Agreeing that customers have become more demanding, Mr Chew said he helps his staff relieve stress by chilling out with them during bi-monthly drinking sessions.

The Fairmont Singapore, which has 769 guest rooms and suites, provides training workshops on how to handle difficult customers. Staff are also encouraged to share their experiences during daily briefing sessions.

But for Mr Govindaraj, his preferred method of relieving stress is to go into the back office and get a drink of water.

"Whenever days don’t go well for me, I’ll remember this: ‘The customer is always a customer’. He may not always be right, but he’s always a customer.”