

The Straits Times looks at organisations that have been rated as the best in keeping customers satisfied, and finds out what makes them tick. This is the final instalment of a four-part weekly series.

Constant drive to improve service

Tan Chong Motor Sales voted the best vehicle retailer in SMU survey

By JALELAH ABU BAKER & CORRIE TAN

A HEARTY breakfast awaits customers at Tan Chong Motor Sales' Ubi centre when they drop off their vehicles for servicing or repairs.

The menu boasts something different every day. Nasi lemak, mee goreng and mee siam are just some of the choices, and they come with an assortment of Malay kueh and hot coffee, tea or Milo.

The free breakfast helps make the wait a tad more palatable. The firm introduced this at its Ubi centre in 2006 as it gets very crowded in the morning with about 80 customers between 7.30am and 10am.

Its efforts to make customers comfortable helped it emerge tops among motor vehicle retailers in a national customer satisfaction survey conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singa-

pore Management University.

A total of 1,250 people who had been to motor vehicle retailers last year gave feedback on areas such as customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and perceived service quality.

Dr Marcus Lee, the institute's academic director, said that Tan Chong Motor experienced the largest increase in loyalty and largest decrease in complaints in its category last year compared with 2007.

"Our aim is not to let any customer walk off dissatisfied," said customer relations manager Pamela Koh.

Other than offering customers breakfast, and a foot massage chair at each centre in Ubi, Jurong, Toa Payoh and Bukit Timah, the firm holds training sessions to improve service.

IT manager Darrell Hixon, 40, who was looking for a car at the Ubi centre, said: "I didn't feel like I was under pressure. There's nothing worse than someone breathing down your neck when you're trying to make a decision. Instead, the staff came over once in a while to check that I was okay, and that was great."

Three years ago, the company sent all its 400 employees, even drivers and clean-

ers, for training to foster teamwork and a customer-oriented mindset.

Sales consultants are also trained not to forsake their customers after clinching deals, because surveys have shown that customers value follow-up service highly, said Ms Chan Wai Leng, a senior manager from the marketing department.

The consultants are expected to keep in touch with customers for six months after they have bought vehicles.

Tan Chong Motor has also cut waiting time at its Ubi service centre from 15 minutes in January to 10 minutes now.

This was done by roping in quality control officers - whose duties include checking that maintenance and repair jobs are done well - to attend to customers whose cars need repair or maintenance.

The company also draws up action plans to identify the causes behind customers' complaints, and to resolve them.

Service department general manager Boo Boo Seng said: "Many companies fail to follow existing procedures consistently. If they do that (follow them) and continuously improve, they can achieve excellence."

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Over the years, Ms Lim has bagged the Outstanding Customer Care award from Tan Chong Motor Sales and the Nissan Sales and Service Way Sales Performance Index award. ST PHOTO: NURIA LING

Consultant goes the extra mile

TAN Chong Motor Sales' senior sales consultant, Ms Evangeline Lim, literally goes the extra mile for her customers.

She once drove a customer from his Buona Vista office to collect his car from a Bukit Timah repair workshop. This was in 2003, when the customer called her "in a panic" because his car had broken down. Ms Lim called for a tow truck to pick up the car and kept tabs on the progress of its repairs.

The following day, she ferried her customer of about seven years to the workshop as she wanted to make sure that everything went smoothly, she said.

For her dedication to her customers, she bagged the Outstanding Customer Care award from Tan Chong Motor Sales in 2003. In 2006, she won the Nissan Sales and Service Way Sales Performance Index award, which is given based on customers' ratings of service quality.

Ms Lim's mobile phone is always turned on. Her decision to remain constantly accessible to customers means she receives calls even in the early hours of the morning, or when she is overseas.

A few years ago, a customer called her at 6am about a punctured tyre. Ms Lim answered the call, and helped to get a tow truck over. "I treat customers the way I would want to be treated," she said.

Her customers appreciate her work so much that she has even been invited to two weddings. She is also invited to holiday celebrations every year - Aidilfitri, Christmas, and Chinese New Year.

And when she gave birth to her daughter four years ago, some of her customers gave her congratulatory gifts. "These customers are practically like friends," she said.

Being a sales consultant is not always smooth sailing. But over nine years on the job, Ms Lim, 35, has learnt not to take it personally when customers criticise her.

"The fault lines appear when you think they're targeting you, and you get defensive. But if you can impress challenging customers, they will usually stay with you for a longer time," she said.

CORRIE TAN

Road to better service

■ **2000:** Tan Chong Motor Sales introduces the Nissan Sales and Service Way, a two-day course to train front-line staff to deal with customers. Employees continue to attend two refresher courses a year. The company also starts giving annual awards to recognise employees for good service.

■ **2006:** The company puts all 400 employees through training to build up team spirit and a customer-oriented mindset. The training also teaches employees to be positive and to apply a personal touch to the services they provide.

■ **2007:** The company issues

guidelines on customer service standards to all its four service centres. Everything is standardised, including how to greet customers, and even how detailed an explanation to give to potential car buyers.

■ **2008:** A consultant firm is hired to teach about 100 sales consultants salesmanship and basic techniques of dealing with customers.

■ **2009:** Employees are trained in managing interpersonal relationships, solving problems and making decisions, to encourage better communication among staff and to build up leadership skills.