

Does Deli Service Matter?



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Many consumers consider retail service to be a nostalgic memory they speak of wistfully. Often technology is used to enable the shopping experience with transactions free of errors and devoid of human contact. Yet, not all retail environments are created equal and the service deli seems to be one of the last places where customer service is required, expected and appreciated.

Younger millennial consumers and baby boom consumers have some significant differences in regard to human interaction and the importance of a positive experience with a deli

employee. Younger consumers are far more accepting of technology-enabled transactions that save time, and they often consider a well-stocked self-service area a manifestation of great service. Consumers over 45 years of age continue to enjoy sampling before making a purchase decision and they rely on the advice of the deli employees whom they expect to have a good working knowledge of the products offered.

In recent conversations with consumers we found the vast majority were satisfied with the service they receive from deli employees. Eighty-five percent of consumers believe deli employees are knowledgeable about the products offered in the service deli. Customers say they can tell when an employee knows what he or she is doing, and appreciate it.

Consumers of all ages consider food they purchase from the service deli to be fresher, and they like the ability to have their order customized exactly the way they like in the exact quantity they need. Eighty-eight percent of consumers prefer to have service when they shop and only resort to other alternatives when they are pressed for time.

Sampling is considered a very positive part of the deli service experience. The deli is literally the only department in the store where customers consistently have an opportunity to try something immediately before they purchase it. Customers say they appreciate the deli samples for their children even more than the free cookie they are sometimes offered in the bakery because a slice of turkey or cheese is inherently more healthful and it makes the shopping experience more of a treat than a chore.

Sometimes a smile is all it takes to make a customer feel special. Numerous comments from customers of all ages addressed the difference a smile and a friendly greeting make to turn the deli experience into more than just a simple transaction. Customers revel in being recognized by an employee who remembers preferences.

When customers were asked about the advice they might have for a store manager who wanted to make the deli a more attractive option, we received hundreds of comments. Following are a few of the key areas where consumers offered advice to assure that your deli delivers world class service.

Sparkle and Shine: Sparkling clean glass, fresh food dis-

plays and well-groomed employees ready to serve make a first impression that lasts. Polished, neat and clean were mentioned over and over as cues to customers that the deli is worth the wait. Clear, concise and easy-to-read signs are considered part of the service experience, and these tell customers the deli is well organized.

Sampling: Sliced-to-order samples by employees who recognize their customers are the ideal. Customers like the fresh, sliced-to-order experience with samples just as much as they like it for their order. Cubes of cheese that have been sitting out with toothpicks and no product label tell cus-

tomers the service won't be much better and make them wonder whether the product will be fresh.

Mindfulness: Nothing is more irritating to customers than employees who don't seem to be paying attention to customers waiting. Even though a clean, fully stocked

case is appealing, little is more irritating than employees cleaning, stocking or chatting with each other when customers are waiting. An employee who acknowledges customers and lets them know they will be served shortly helps make it worth the wait. Customers universally dislike getting the last few slices of a loaf and want employees to be mindful of this common preference.

Get Fresh: The service deli gets universally high marks for freshness. Just as universal are complaints about products that are pre-sliced -- pre-cut product is perceived as dry and less fresh. Consumers will often opt for the self-service deli where they can quickly grab a package of a product that is close to what they want if they think the service deli is going to serve them pre-cut product.

Even though employees do slice to order when requested, customers sometimes sensed that employees gave them the feeling they were being unnecessarily picky to ask for this expected service when they were told, "We just cut it this morning."

Healthfulness: Although the deli gets high marks for freshness, healthfulness of salad offerings is sometimes noted as a challenge. Salads heavily laden with mayonnaise are perceived to "scream fattening." Nothing frustrates health-conscious customers more than when they ask for nutrition information or a detailed list of ingredients and employees cannot fulfill the request. One of the primary reasons customers noted for not shopping more often in the deli was the lack of healthy offerings.

The Right Selection: A selection of products tailored to the desires of your customers is key. In some areas customers asked for more organic products and in others they wanted a wider selection of luxurious imported cheeses. No matter what they wanted, all agree deli managers who listened to their requests and responded were the ones who gained their loyalty.

Although technology is the great enabler, it is clear personal service in the deli still matters. **DB**

*Does Service Matter? study from
the Culinary Visions Panel yields
actionable insights*