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Post-Lockdown Expectations Set to Challenge All Venues

Post-lockdown expectations of 'the perfect meal out' have made guests more likely to complain about restaurants and bars. Flagship food, service, value and COVID-related procedures are integral to the success of hospitality venues attracting customers after lockdown eases. New data has revealed that customer expectations post-lockdown focus on certain reassurances being met and the venues that thrive and celebrate returning trade will be those that consider the mindset of its visitors.

Feed It Back analysed data from over 400,000 pieces of feedback during the reopening periods from 4 July to December 2020 to discover how customer behaviour played out post-lockdown, in an effort to give operators reopening in 2021 the best insight into what would make their customers happy, rather than disappoint them.

During post-lockdown opening weekend last year, NPS scores were set at 66, but dropped to 58 by the end of the month and went down to 54 by August 2020. New or first-time visitors were not as forgiving with any shortfalls than those big fans that were out in the forces on the opening weekend, but reading the data another way this is where the opportunity lies - new visitors create new opportunities to broaden the consumer base and each new touchpoint is a way for guests to become fans and marketeers for the brand.

At the same time, the average service scores between July and August dipped from 4.6 to 4.5, showing that throughout the government's roll out of Eat Out To Help Out [EOTHO], the influx of new visitors to trade venues impacted on levels of customer satisfaction and, despite pent up demand, many customers felt let down by the experience.

Taking learnings from last summer, the hospitality trade must harness this insight to boost its success for reopening. The findings remind that the first customers through the door will be the venue's biggest fans and yet this also means their expectations for recreating the experience they have been missing will be extremely high. Equally, there will be a lot of new customers visiting venues for the first time and those guests won't be quite as forgiving if there are any shortfalls and are most likely to complain.

Reduced menus and availability issues were a big disappointment for a number of guests with 11% of negative social reviews referring to limited or reduced menus. This



shows that guests miss their favourite hospitality venues and their most popular flagship dishes they know and love, so heed must be taken for operators to adhere to a line-up of key dishes and drinks to manage visitor expectations. The data showed that people will however accept a reduced menu as long as there is enough choice and, more importantly, good availability.

The industry has worked hard on COVID-19 safety, but the word 'table' is still central within comments, so considered a key concern for those less confident to return. This means that table spacing and table cleanliness need to be visibly adhered to in order to win customer confidence. 94% of customers in July 2020 said they were confident to return, however of those who were not satisfied, 26% mentioned the word 'table' in the comments showing that people are still naturally cautious about table spacing and cleanliness. 24% of comments mentioned staff, showing that awareness of both service and courtesy is a primary factor to those who dine out. 16% of comments mentioned 'mask' which shows many are still apprehensive about safety measures.

Insight also showed that spacing out tables is a must, as is communicating to guests to reassure them of distances/safety measures. 41% of guests who said they didn't feel confident to return and mentioned 'tables' also mentioned 'spacing' and 26% mentioned 'cleanliness'.

Wildwood pizza and pasta restaurants saw a 13-point increase in its NPS score in line with improving its guest's confidence to return by 6%.

Tasty plc, the listed company that operates Wildwood, said: "Before we started re-opening in July 2020, we realised that it was essential for us to build guests' confidence to encourage a return to our restaurants. Initially our key objective was to understand our customers' safety concerns and any adjusted consumer habits and patterns that now existed. Feed It Back were instrumental in assisting us to map out a successful re-opening plan with a tweaked menu and the necessary protocols in place to optimise revenue and appeal during the most difficult times. Our performance was constantly monitored at restaurant level, against industry benchmarking which quickly highlighted any issues or problems. The Feed It Back input allowed us to be agile to our customers' needs and preferences. The weekly well considered reports and summaries enabled us to proactively tailor our offer, service and health and safety guidelines to enhance customer satisfaction and experience. As a result, we saw an increase not only in guests' confidence to return, but also their readiness to recommend us (NPS). We are certain that this level of understanding provided by the surveys and the Feed It Back analysis translated into tremendous sales growth for Tasty across both brands."



Similarly, Boston Tea Party gleaned insight from the findings and as a result lifted its NPS scores to gain a 19-point increase while also reducing its speed of service complaints by 57% from Q3 to Q4. Anita Atkins, Brand Director, Boston Tea Party said: “Implementing order and pay at tables was not something we had considered before the pandemic. However, we knew we had to change our service model in order to adapt to the new rules whilst making our customers feel safe. Aware that we'd lost a contact point with the customers we've used it to enable our team to deliver a better experience by getting out from behind the tills and engaging with our customers on the floor. Our customers and teams have loved it and as a result, our spend per head has improved, our speed of service complaints have dropped dramatically and our NPS has rocketed, meaning customers are much more likely to return and recommend our cafes to others.”

Feed It Back data also showed that food and service continued to be the key drivers of praise among venues, so delivering good food promptly is crucial for businesses looking for success. Whereas food is also the top concern when looking at complaints.

Value is another challenge that needs to be overcome while consumer confidence is fragile. For any venue owner looking at improving its level of service, finding ways to enable guests to see the value can help boost its appeal. When looking at topics raised by guests scoring low on value, 31% of guests also raised a service-related topic; 25% of guests raised a food-related topic; 13% of guests raised an availability topic.

Feed It Back CEO Carlo Platia said: “NPS data showed the industry did a fantastic job hitting the ground running last July and there will be pent-up demand on re-opening, so this is your opportunity to win new fans. But remember, reduced menus and availability disappointed a lot of guests, so consider what your guests love most about your menu and ensure you don't run out of it.”

Platia added: “Post-lockdown last year, we learned that despite confidence to return being high, tables are a key issue for the ‘COVID-nervous’ guests, so remember to ensure tables are distanced and ‘visible cleaning’ is taking place as much as possible to offer customers reassurance. Food and service are the key areas praised, but value remains a key complaint after the initial shock to consumer confidence, so expect more value concerns as we learn to live with COVID. Our sector is a determined and resilient one, but we need to stay aware of the details that can help us rebuild from a stronger base. Good luck to everyone. We are in this together.”



Feed It Back

Feed It Back is the customer experience dashboard for hospitality operators. It gathers the data to tell you how customers are feeling about your business and shows how you're performing across your estate, by region, by venue, in absolute detail. You can see what customers love and exactly where they think you can improve to keep them coming – so they recommend you to others. Feed It Back's experts become part of your team, highlighting trends, making sure you don't miss subtle details and sharing insights to help you build your reputation.

It currently boasts a range of clients including: Loungers, Boston Tea Party, Tenpin, Marston's, Friday's and Paul UK, to name a few.

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