

Delivering Service To-Go: A Case Study on Street Vendor Operators in Central Florida

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ABSTRACT

Since the proclamation of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), companies have turned their focus from selling goods to selling experiences. The street food sector has been serving up experiences since the 1700s. Yet very little is actually known in regards to how these business entities deliver these experiences. The purpose of this study is to explore street food vendor operators' perception of the factors that contribute to the customer experience in the street food sector. In doing so, this paper provides valuable information about demographics of street food operators and customers, what kinds of experiences they are opt to deliver, and the reasons why their customers eat street food.

Key Words: street vendor, service delivery, experience, qualitative

LITERAURE REVIEW

To explore street food vendor operators' perception of delivering service experiences to the customers, several features that would determine product quality and service quality need to be discussed. This study was designed to determine if product quality and service quality influence customer experience in street carts. Since there are limited studies related to service experience between street vendors and customers, the current study adopted features used to evaluate the fast food industry. The rationale to adopt categories from the fast food industry is that street vendor sector has similar characteristics; both offer affordable products or services to their customers and provide them in a timely manner.

While the focus of this study is the street vendor sector, the attributes used to measure various features of this and other industry segments such as table service restaurants are not mutually exclusive. For example, the taste of a food product, price of food, and courtesy of employees would be applicable to the majority of restaurants, regardless of the type of concept (Reich, et al., 2005). Hoisington and Naumann (2003) affirmed that customers use five major categories to value a company's performance: product quality, service quality, quality of relationship between customer and supplier, image, and price perception. For a tangible product, quality might include features, usability, or compatibility. For a service offering, this would include the various dimensions of the service being provided (Hoisington & Naumann, 2003).

The market of street food vendors has become a part of culture for urban populations. Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) describes street vendors as persons selling foods other than fresh fruits or vegetables from trucks, trailers or similar self-propelled conveyances. A mobile food vendor license, cart permit, and a valid food safety certificate issued by the FDACS are the requirement for operating a processing mobile food vending unit in Florida. A fee of three hundred dollars must be paid to obtain a permit. An approved facility that provides support services for specific required functions of a mobile food establishment (MFE) must be used.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was used to understand how street vendors perceive a delivering service to customers. A case study approach matched the exploratory emergent nature of the study (Creswell, 2003; Severt, Aiello, Elswick, & Cyr, 2008). This was a case study of 8 processing street food vendors found operating in October 2010 on Central Florida's Orange Blossom Trail Corridor. Food cart locations tend to locate themselves primarily in two locations in central Florida. This major road in central Florida boasts high traffic, numerous big box retail shops, the Florida Mall, and several nightclubs. In addition, there were food carts in various locations in downtown Orlando, which boasts business and government building as well as a vibrant nightlight district

The role of the researchers was to collect data for the study as participants and observers. Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with the street vendors. Three to four hours long for each time, four visits were made to Central Florida's OBT through October 2010. Interviews were conducted with owners or operators because interviews with key decision makers are one of the best ways to identify the key symptoms (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2009). As these semi-structured interviews were conducted, detailed notes were recorded. Cross-referencing among the researchers was implemented. Unstructured observations involved viewing the exterior perimeters to detect visible elements in the service environment (Severt, et al, 2008). The researchers observed the parking lot where the street vendors are on site, along with a few sitting tables for customers to dine in. The researchers also observed decorations; for example, the vans were wrapped with pictures of food and menus, and vendors hang up flags to represent their nationality or their origin of dishes.

FINDINGS/IMPLICATIONS/FUTURE STUDY

It is difficult to imagine that street food vendors can design an experience through mechanic and humane cues as they do not have permanent structures but it is entirely possible. With respect to the mechanic cues, each street vendor we visited had a unique cart by which they prepared and delivered their product; some looked like mobile homes, trailers or simply mobile push carts. This forces the guest to experience the humane cues. Out of the eight street food vendors this study observed, five had some form of a “host” who directed the guest throughout their experience. As the guests approached the host would welcome them to the cart and highlight some of the menu specials while indicating their favorites.

An overwhelming phrase this study heard throughout the interviews was, “People come to us to bring them back, back to their home country. They want that sensation of sitting at mom’s dinner table simply enjoying food with friends and family.” Additional findings were in the areas of confirming sensory design, confirming engaging customers, confirming dramatic structure, and confirming fellow customers. For industry practitioners the key to offering experience-centric services is to simplify the process. In order to complete the overall story, perceptions of food carts by customers would provide a complete overall picture of this phenomenon. Also, since this study is relatively new in an emerging industry, a comparison study could be implemented in emerging food carts in other cities.

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