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Understanding American customer perceptions on Japanese food and services in the U.S

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Understanding American customer perceptions on Japanese food and services in the U.S

By

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ABSTRACT

Understanding American customer perceptions on Japanese food and services in the U.S

by

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Part One

Introduction

The U.S economy is officially in recession. The 2008 U.S. financial crash that originated in the subprime mortgage market is expected to be the deepest slump in the world economy since the 1930's. This financial crisis immediately impacted many industries throughout the world and as a result the world economy plummeted (Altman, 2009). The food and service industry is one of the most devastated industries facing stress factors such as declining Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and high oil prices. However, in this financial crisis, the ethnic food market in the U.S has actually expanded (Mill, 2000), resulting in heavy competition. Due to globalization, ethnic food consumption has become one of the ways to appreciate other cultures. In fact, many Americans who dine out have revealed that they frequently pursue new tastes and experiences, and that ethnic cuisine is where they look. Some of the most prevalent examples of ethnic restaurants in the United States include Italian, Chinese and Mexican food. Japanese food, however, has grown tremendously in recent years and is the most popular ethnic cuisine in the U.S after Italian, Chinese and Mexican cuisine.

This year, the National Restaurant Association's list of the top 20 food trends for 2010 suggests that we are making decisions based on our health and the environment (NRA, 2010). About twenty years ago when people thought of Japan they would think of bullet trains, electronics, Mt. Fuji, and big business. Now, most people will also mention they are also big fans of its beautiful cuisine. In the 80's people in the US began to try Japanese cuisine as it was determined to be healthy and exotic. Currently many Americans know that Japanese cuisine, with its concentration on fresh raw fish, seafood, rice and vegetables, is some of the healthiest food on earth. The Japanese still enjoy a great quality of life and have the longest life expectancy

in the world. How do they do it? It is not just efficient urban planning; rather, many people believe the answer is in Japan's cuisine. Ingredients are locally grown, healthy and sustainable such as rice, miso, seafood, and cultivated seaweed. This is why Japanese cuisine is becoming the most popular ethnic cuisine in the United States (Akamatsu, Maeda, Hagihara, & Shirakawa, 2005).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide an appropriate approach for Japanese restaurant operators to identify the wants and needs of their American customers, and thereby assist restaurateurs in developing strategies that would best attract this market. There are many important attributes of Japanese food and services that affect the satisfaction and behavioral intentions of American customers. Japanese restaurant operators should recognize the perceptions of their American customers and monitor the factors affecting customer satisfaction and revisit intention. This effort will lead Japanese restaurants in the U.S. to improve their operational and marketing efficiency, and thereby increase profitability.

Justification

Many previous studies have addressed the important attributes of ethnic food and service quality, and their influence on customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. Freshness was determined to be one of the most important food attributes, followed by taste. Nutrition and cleanliness of a food service was the single most important factor creating customer satisfaction (Barber, Goodman, & Goh, 2010; Deluco & Cremer, 1990). No study has been performed however, that looks specifically at key attributes of Japanese food and service. By understanding which attributes are extremely important and essential to American customers, Japanese

restaurateurs in the US can investigate specific features to focus on in order to increase customer satisfaction and retention. Identification of these attributes, therefore, could be vital to the success of a restaurant.

Due to the surprising growth of ethnic restaurants during this financial crisis, the industry has met its biggest challenge in years. Competition between ethnic restaurants has become extremely aggressive and businesses are focused on attaining the highest revenue possible in order to remain profitable. As the ethnic food market becomes more competitive, customers' decisions are based on impressions regarding attributes of foods and service quality. Therefore, restaurant operators should use a customer-oriented marketing strategy that identifies customer needs, thereby leading to their satisfaction and loyalty. The question raised here is: which food, service, and atmosphere attributes do American customers of Japanese restaurants consider when deciding on what food to consume? Additionally, how important is each of these attributes to them?

According to a study on the impact that Asian food attributes have on the level of consumer satisfaction (Jang & Silkes, 2009), consumer satisfaction depends on different food attributes with high performance of foods in successful marketing. A customer's perspective on food and service attributes is considered to be an important factor that can influence customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the food and service industry (Liu & Jang, 2009; Namkung & Jang, 2007). For a restaurant, perceived quality attributes can be divided into four different categories: food quality, service quality and atmospheric quality. These restaurant attributes are strongly related to customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. This study attempts to: (1) discover American customers' perceived importance on attributes of Japanese

foods and services in the U.S.; (2) observe perceptions of American customers regarding the performance of Japanese restaurants; (3) identify the attributes that affect American customers' satisfaction with Japanese restaurants; and (4) recognize the attributes that most influence revisit intentions toward Japanese restaurants. The results of this study are expected to provide guidelines for restaurateurs, with insight on how to effectively implement this knowledge into their operational and marketing strategies. The findings also will provide suggestions to Japanese restaurant operators on how to identify areas requiring improvement in Japanese restaurants that cater to American customers.

Constraints

There are some limitations to this research. There has been only a modest amount of studies focusing on the restaurant attributes that influence customer perceptions along with customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in Japanese restaurants. An additional limitation is sampling of the population. Perspectives of American customers can be dissimilar based on location. For example, Americans in the Southwest may have completely different tastes and perspectives than Americans in the Northeast. The different weather in these two areas might be one of the factors that influence consumer tastes and perspectives. For example, people in Nevada may have a tendency to consume more cold food such as sushi and sashimi, and people in New York might prefer hot pot dishes such as ramen and tempura udon due to the colder weather in the Northeast. Therefore, generalization can be a problem. Finally, due to extraneous variables that may influence customer's perspectives, it is impossible to draw one absolute conclusion.

Glossary

SERVQUAL: is an instrument tool for evaluating the gap between the services that expectation of customers towards service and what they think actually has been received and provided by the service provider. The methodology is based on five dimensions; Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

DINESERV: is an instrument tool for evaluating service quality in food and service industry and it is projected as a dependable, relatively simple instrument tool for evaluating how customers view an overall restaurant's quality. According to DINESERV, the five dimensions of service quality are:

1. Reliability: capability to execute the promised service reliably and accurately.
2. Assurance: awareness and knowledge of employees and their capability to express trust and confidence.
3. Responsiveness: Willpower of employee to support customers and provide appropriate service.
4. Tangibles: Physical environments, equipments, facilities and appearance of employee.
5. Empathy: Caring, individualized attention (Stevens, Knutson, & Patton, 1995).

Part Two

Literature Review

Introduction

The United States is a diverse country of many cultures and ethnicities. The trend of multiculturalism is growing and expected to increase rapidly in the future, with Americans trying new and different tastes, and thereby consuming more ethnic foods (Josiam & Monteiro, 2004). During the recession the invasion of new immigrants helped ethnic cuisine spread widely in the United States. This started a popular trend among American customers in the U.S food service industry (Josiam & Monteiro, 2004). In fact, most popular and well-known ethnic cuisines such as Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisine have turn out to be so common to American customers that they consider these cuisines to be American food. As people's lifestyles change and eating out becomes more commonplace, American customers tend to crave a special meal accompanied by an unforgettable experience. In the restaurant industry, understanding customers' perceptions of food and service attributes will be the key to success.

Japanese restaurants in the United States

Ethnic food sales in the United States surpassed \$2.2 billion in year 2009 and are expected to increase by 20% by 2014. Around 65% of these sales are attributed to the foodservice market (US Ethnic Food Market, 2005). An estimated 15.2 million residents say they are mixed-race Asian, which is about 5% of the total U.S. population. Additionally, California is the state that contains the largest population of Asian-Americans with approximately 5 million people (US Ethnic Food Market, 2005). Therefore, the Asian food market is one of the largest

ethnic food markets in the U.S. Its customers are not only Asian-American, but also Americans of diverse backgrounds who have come to crave fresh and exotic cuisines.

Growth in the popularity of Japanese food among American customers is evidenced by both a surge in Japanese restaurants over the past recession and an increase in food imports. According to JETRO's research (Jetro Japanese Restaurants Trends, 2010), the number of Japanese restaurants in the United States increased from 9,128 in 2005 to 14,129 in 2010. These statistics are up, approximately 1.5 times greater than in 2005, despite the fact that the United States is facing a challenging economy. The success of Japanese cuisine in the U.S is part of the food trend towards healthy, sustainable, and fresh food. Japanese cuisine is characteristically fresh and simple. Its healthy natural ingredients make it much more nutritious than American food in general. Japanese food is traditionally based on nutrition from natural ingredients whereas most American 'healthy' food is a result of cutting fat and calories from the original food (Sobko, Marcus, Govoni, & Kamiya, 2010). The nutritious qualities of Japanese food are largely due to the geography of Japan. Japan consists of four main islands and thousands of smaller ones. It is geographically isolated and it is prone to many challenges such as earthquakes. Due to these negative geographical factors, the Japanese have had to rely on the most prevalent natural resources around them: fish from the sea and vegetables from the mountains. Because Japan is surrounded by the sea, there is always seasonal fresh seafood available and most Japanese cuisine is seafood based (Sobko et al, 2010). Rice is also abundant in Japan and therefore another staple in Japanese cuisine. Short grain rice has especially played a huge part in Japanese culture. Short grain rice is often called sushi rice and it is the best choice for rice puddings and rice cakes. Rice is also prevalent in Japanese drinking culture, with the rice-based

alcohol sake. Another influence on the distinctive style of Japanese food is the cultural isolation of Japan by Korea and China.

Unlike other ethnic foods, Japanese food has a refreshing and delicate flavor that comes from the absence of heavy spices, and a lightness that results from an extremely low use of dairy products and fat. Some people believe that tasty food requires the use of such unhealthy ingredients, but Japanese cuisine makes an exception to this common belief as it is both tasty and healthy. Japanese cuisine, known for its healthy ingredients and great taste, is an extremely popular choice for Asian foods in the U.S. ethnic food market. (Active Diner, 2010)

In recent decades, the American customer has become more sophisticated. This has caused aggressive competition among ethnic restaurants. According to the National Restaurant Association, increased knowledge of ethnic foods has changed the perceptions of American customers (NRA 2000a). Because of this, a new taste and experience is no longer sufficient in attracting customers in the U.S to ethnic restaurants (NRA 2000b). They are no longer willing to spend their money on mediocre service or food quality. Today's consumer is searching for an exceptional, unique, and unconventional dining experience. Because of these challenging factors, the importance of understanding American customers' perceptions of Japanese restaurant attributes is the key to success (Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007). To achieve greater success, Japanese restaurateurs should focus on the attributes that are wanted and expected by American consumers in order to better satisfy their existing customers as well as attract new customers.

Customer satisfaction and related theories

People generally expect to be treated well when they go to a restaurant or any place that provides service, even in the fast food industry. When customers feel like they are receiving

quality service that is above and beyond and makes them feel special, they will likely continue to support the establishment. By satisfying even the simplest of requests, an establishment can make its guests feel important and special (Soderlund & Rosengren, 2007). When good service is achieved however, it is vital to maintain that level of service experience in order to retain customers as well as grow the customer base. Customer service should be consistent, efficient and genuine to create customer satisfaction (Liu & Jang, 2009). The idea of “customer satisfaction” has been an issue in many previous marketing literatures in past couple of decades. Highly satisfied customers are the fundamental asset of the restaurant business. Because attracting new customers costs more than keeping existing customers and making them loyal, there is a strong relationship between profit and customer loyalty or repeat purchase behavior (Szymanski & Henard, 2001). In recent research studies, it has been proven that satisfied customers perform a “word-of-mouth” strategy, that creates a positive impact on the success of firms (Soderlund & Rosengren, 2007). In effect, this strategy will result in highly satisfied customers coming back again and again and tell other people about their unique experience. This is one of the most effective and successful ways to market one’s business in the restaurant industry (Jeong & Jang, 2010).

Research has resulted in numerous theories and models regarding customer satisfaction, including: expectancy disconfirmation theory, the performance model, equity theory, contrast theory, and value percept theory (Liu & Jang, 2009). Expectancy-disconfirmation theory is the most common and widely accepted theory for customer satisfaction analysis (Weiss, Feinstein, & Dalbor, 2004). According to this theory, customer satisfaction can be defined as the measuring the outcome’s gap between customer expectation and perceived performance. If the perceived

performance observed exceeds the expectation, the measurement results in positive disconfirmation and the provided performance was better than expected. In contrast to positive disconfirmation, when the comparison results in negative disconfirmation perceived performance is below expectations. In other words, the customer is dissatisfied about the performance. This theory suggests that the higher the level of performance is, or the higher positive the disconfirmation, the greater the customer satisfaction will be (Yi, 1990).

Equity theory, also known as the comparison or inequity theory, focuses on the balance between the customers' input and the outcome of these inputs. This theory also focuses on comparing the results with other customers' similar experiences. It explores service equality and fairness as the primary factor of customer satisfaction. The perception of fairness is affected by distributive justice (Folger & Konovsky, 1989). Distributive justice measures the gap between the ratios of outcome and input compared with the ratios of another person working in a similar position. As equity theory suggests, customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction may derive from the perceived fairness or unfairness of comparing with others in similar situations. For example, if Customer A and Customer B dine at a restaurant almost every day (input), there may be instances when Customer A will receive a special dealing (outcome) from the restaurant whereas Customer B may not receive the same special dealing (outcome). The same input was provided by both of the customers, but different output was generated for each customer. In this case, the customer's perception towards to this restaurant would be negative and unfair, so the customer would be dissatisfied. According to equity theory, customer satisfaction is the outcome of the perception on fairness in an exchange situation compared to that of other people who are working in similar situations (Bolton & Lemon 1999; Oliver & Swan 1989).

Behavioral intention

Previous service experiences normally dictate how customers will act upon their restaurant dining experience. In general, once a customer has received an excellent and memorable experience, they will express favorable behavioral intentions in the future. Favorable behavioral intentions can include recommending the restaurant to others, spreading positive word of mouth, and becoming a loyal customer (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Customer behavioral intentions are the consequences of perceived value that plays a significant function in purchase decision making. The behavioral intention theory was founded by Ajzen and Fishbein. They indicated that intentions are “assumed to capture motivational factors that influence factors that influence a behavior” and can also be a determinant of how much effort someone is willing to give when conducting a behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Based on previous empirical research, there is a significant correlation between customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. For instance, Oliver (1980) found that a highly satisfying dining experience has a significant positive influence on the customer’s behavioral intentions and it will increase customer’s retention rate. According to Kivela, Inbakaran, and Reece’s (1999) study, customer retention rate depends on customer satisfaction with five attributes within the restaurant: service quality, food quality, ambience quality, first and last impression, and the comfort level of the restaurant. These results all support the strong connection between customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the food and service industry. However, previous research has also shown that attributes that affect customer satisfaction do not always influence behavioral intention. Namkyung and Jang (2007) explained through their research that although

the temperature of food had a strong relationship with customer satisfaction, there was no significant effect on behavioral intention. In contrast, green food and healthy ingredients showed a strong relationship with behavioral intention, however no significant influence on customer satisfaction. Therefore, restaurateurs should focus on the effects of attributes of foods and services that influence both customer satisfaction and as well as behavioral intention. Oliver (1997) referred to behavioral intentions as an estimation of the likelihood to conduct a certain behavior. Based on this, restaurant customer behavioral intentions can be explained as a natural marketing tool for the restaurant and work as positive word of mouth in the future.

Restaurant attributes affecting customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions

Several previous studies have evaluated and analyzed attributes of restaurants that affect customer satisfaction. Previous empirical studies have indicated that there is indeed a link between restaurant attributes and customer satisfaction. According to the literature, food quality, service quality, and atmosphere are the most important restaurant attributes which affect customers' overall dining satisfaction and post-dining behavioral intentions (Liu & Jang, 2009). Furthermore, in this competitive restaurant market, restaurateurs should understand customer wants and needs, and create a well thought-out concept for those targeted customers. Delwiche (2004) recommended that food attributes such as taste and perceived food quality from the restaurant also have a significant influence and relationship with customer satisfaction and customer behavior intention.

Food quality

Quality of food has consistently been shown as one of the core attributes that customers consider when deciding on a restaurant (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Food quality is an essential

element that restaurants must provide in order to fulfill the customer's needs (Peri, 2006). Sulek and Hensley (2004) reported the significance of food quality, atmosphere, and service quality in restaurants. They found that food quality came out to be the most important forecaster of customer satisfaction, as well as being the only attribute forecasting dining behavioral intention. Also, Namkung and Jang (2007) examined the relative factors that constitute food quality (presentation, health options, taste, freshness, variety, and temperature), and found that food presentation impacts the appetite of the customer and their perception of food quality. Kivela et al (1999) mentioned that food presentation is an essential food attribute in designing customer dining satisfaction. According to Johns, Tyas, Ingold, and Hopkinson (1996), dishes offered with sustainable and healthy ingredients will most likely have a positive effect on the customer's perceived assessment of the restaurant experience. Another key element in food attributes that has a huge influence on restaurant customer satisfaction and behavioral intention was found to be taste (Kivela, 1999). Freshness and temperature are also essential sensory elements of food attributes, and these elements interact with other factors such as taste, smell, and sight (Delwiche, 2004). For example, an item that should be served hot but is delivered cold will affect the customer perceptions and taste of the food, and contribute to an unpleasant dining experience. Food safety is another attribute that has been found to influence perception of food quality. Instances such as a customer being served undercooked food or finding an unpleasant or unsafe substance such as hair, glass, or plastic will cause dissatisfaction within the customer, as well as potentially decrease their loyalty (Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

A review of the marketing literature expresses that customer satisfaction and customer perceptions on food quality are correlated (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Churchill & Surprenant,

1982). Therefore, food quality is one of the core attributes that influence restaurant customer satisfaction (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996).

Service quality

Since there are many restaurant options available, restaurant customers will not hesitate to leave an establishment for a new one if the restaurant fails to provide quality service. The importance of service quality has increased in recent years, and many researchers have shown the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Perceived quality of service is a matter of knowing one's customers, managing one's employees to meet customer needs and wants, and delivering to the customer what was promised. The delivery of high quality service is especially difficult because of the intangible nature of the service offering. Therefore, restaurants should develop a system that will both evaluate service performance as well as improve service delivery (Ryu & Han, 2010).

In recent literature, perceived quality service has been defined as the overall excellence or superiority of the service based on customers' judgment (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The definition of quality service may vary depending on a person and the situation. Because of this, customers evaluate service quality subjectively based on comparisons of their expectations and perceived performance. Parasuraman et al (1988) developed the most widely accepted and often used instrument for measuring service quality called "SERVQUAL". This instrument measures the gap between customers' expectations on service and the actual service perceived. This instrument consists of five service dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Each dimension works as an indicator to evaluate overall quality of service. Tangibility indicates physical tools, equipment, facilities, and

appearance of personnel. In general, reliability represents ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. In the restaurant industry, an example of reliability would be consistent food quality such as temperature and freshness. Responsiveness indicates willingness to assist customers and provide excellent service. Assurance is defined as an employee's knowledge and awareness of employees and their talent to provide faith and confidence. Empathy represents caring, individualized attention that is shown to each customer.

In restaurants, most customers evaluate the service quality during their dining experience, and perceive service quality as one of the most important indicator of customer satisfaction. In today's world of aggressive competition, restaurateurs who provide quality service and value have a great advantage over those that do not (Ryu & Han, 2010). Stevens, Knutson, and Patton (1995) have applied the SERVQUAL instrument to the restaurant industry. They developed the DINESERV instrument based on the SERVQUAL instrument to estimate overall service quality perceived from customers in restaurants. By implementing the DINESERV instrument, restaurant managers and owners were able to identify problems with customers' views of restaurant service quality. Also, DINESERV provides what customers expect in restaurants, so restaurant managers and owners can exceed customers' expectations by providing better than expected service quality (Stevens et al, 1995).

Yuksel and Yusel (2002) mentioned that quality of service had the most significant impact on restaurant customer satisfaction, especially for those who love healthy food. Andaleeb and Conway (2006) investigated attributes correlated to customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. They discovered that service quality was the most important attribute in determining customer satisfaction, above food quality, price, and ambience.

Physical Environment

Atmosphere is the quality of the surrounding atmosphere to create an image that will support in influencing customer behavior (Jeong & Jang, 2010). While food and service quality should always be at an exceptional level, a pleasing atmosphere may contribute to a greater level of overall satisfaction and subsequent behavior in the food service industry. Since services require the customer to be present during the process because of the intangible character of the service providing, the atmosphere of a restaurant can have a significant impact on the perceptions of the overall quality of the service encounter. This in turn affects dining satisfaction in the food service industry (Ryu & Jang, 2008). There are many different atmospheric factors that influence customer satisfaction and behavior: lighting, music, temperature, scent, smell and furnishings, among others. Environmental elements in the restaurant have a huge impact on the emotional responses and behavior of customers. Areni and Kim (1994) discussed the influence of store lighting on shopping attitude and behavior in a retail store setting, such as the amount of time spent and money spent in the store. The research indicates that there is a strong relationship between brightness of lighting and customers' emotional behavior and responses. Lighting can be one of the most influential atmospheric factors in restaurant industry, especially in fine dining restaurants. Fast food restaurants such as McDonald's tend to have bright lighting to symbolize quick service and relatively low price. Upscale restaurants tend to have dark lighting to symbolize luxury and high price. In an upscale restaurant, ambience (e.g., temperature, aroma, and music) and appearance of employees have the most impact on customers' emotional behavior and responses (Ryu & Jang, 2007). Music is another atmospheric element that influences customer satisfaction and behavior. Background music at restaurants can affect

customer eating time and purchasing intentions. In addition, Chang (2000) suggested that perceived atmosphere was a direct determinant of a customer's satisfaction and behavioral intention. Thus, restaurateurs should manage environmental surroundings to maximize customer satisfaction.

Other factors – perceived price

Aside from food, service and physical environment, perceived price is another factor that influences customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Price is considered to be a major indicator of customer satisfaction and behavior. Perceived price can be defined as the customer's acceptable, reasonable, and fair judgment about a service's average price in comparison to its competitors (Chen, Gupta, & Rom, 1994). The concept of perceived price is based on customers' internal allusion prices, which means the perception of the price, can be generated by the last paid price and the price most frequently paid, as well as market price. So when customers are concerned about a certain price, they put into consideration whether they are paying more or about the same as the competitive prices available. Customers will likely come back again and again if price is perceived as fair. The price of a product is highly related to its perceived value. For example, people are willing to pay more for a fine dining restaurant because they expect the high prices to reflect their high quality product. However, they will not pay the same amount of money on fast food restaurants such as McDonalds. Therefore, perceived price is a measurement of perceived value. The correlation between quality of attributes and customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry has an influence on perceived price. Specifically, in order to make customers perceive the price as reasonable, satisfaction with food quality must exist. In other words, customers' perceptions of reasonable price intervene as a moderating variable to increase the

impact of food quality on satisfaction (Ryu & Han, 2010). Perception fairness price can provide positive attitudinal and behavioral responses that increase the loyalty of customers.

Restaurants should be cautious when they increase menu price. Customers are very sensitive about food price. For example, they may consider an increase in menu price as being fair if it was due to cost increase but perceive it as unfair if it were not due to an increase in cost. Perceived unfairness price can generate negative attitude and behavior such as complaining and defecting to other restaurants (Liu & Jang 2009).

Conclusion

When comparing American and ethnic restaurants, ethnic restaurants generally make more use of ethnic decoration, design, music and different signs to produce an 'authentic' dining experience for American customers. Many ethnic restaurants in the United States try to create a set of unique attributes that will attract American customers. Japanese restaurant managers and owners should understand and focus on the perceived attributes of Japanese foods and services. A better understanding of these attributes will allow a restaurant to differentiate itself from the competition. Based on the literature review, this study indicated the importance of understanding the attributes of Japanese food and services, (food quality, service quality, atmospheric, and price fairness) as perceived by American customers and identified the key attributes affecting customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Part Three

Introduction

Japanese restaurants in the United States face aggressive competition. Due to this intense competitive atmosphere, these restaurateurs could benefit from developing their own unique marketing plans as a way of differentiating their business from that of competitors. Before establishing marketing strategies for Japanese restaurants however, it is vital to understand what American customers want from these restaurants and which attributes will lead to customer satisfaction. By utilizing the suggested survey methodology, Japanese restaurateurs can better understand their guests and thereby better serve them resulting in higher levels of customer satisfaction and ultimately increased profit.

Survey Questionnaire

Compared to other restaurants, Japanese restaurants are unique in their food and service culture. For example, most Japanese restaurants have sushi bars where customers can directly order their food from a sushi chef over the counter where they are seated. Customers at the sushi counter can watch how sushi chefs prepare and present their food. Therefore, sanitation and cleanliness can be a more important attribute compared to other restaurants with closed kitchens, for example. Because most Japanese food consists of raw fish, poor food handling, and sanitary conditions can quickly lead to disease or sickness. This type of situation could be of great detriment to the restaurant, even if it is a one-time incident.

The service culture in Japan is taken very seriously. Japanese restaurants have their own unique service. When customers enter they are greeted by the employees' enthusiastic welcome: "Irasshaimase!" It means "welcome" and is the Japanese traditional way of greeting people in a

shop or a restaurant. In Japan, people attach great importance to service. Especially at restaurants, Japanese employees treat guests like royalty. In fact, making customers feel welcome is so important that employees who do not properly greet customers are often fired. Many American people love to experience this unique cultural aspect of Japanese restaurants. Examples such as this illustrate attributes that are unique to Japanese restaurants, and features of authentic Japanese restaurants that American customers may or may not like. A survey specific to attributes that American customers expect from Japanese restaurants therefore could be vital to a restaurant's ability to complete.

American perceptions may vary depending on their demographic characteristics (Ryu & Han, 2010). Thus, restaurant operators should develop a survey that includes customers' demographics such as gender, age, marital status, dining companion, and income. In first part of the questionnaire, as seen in Appendix A, respondents are asked to answer demographic questions that create a profile of the participant. Demographic characteristics may provide Japanese restaurateurs with a better understanding of customer perceptions and suggest ways to be more creative and innovative in their marketing strategies. For example, if most customers who visit the Japanese restaurant are seniors, then the restaurant operator should develop an innovative marketing strategy for senior customers such as providing them with certain discounts. Or, if the demographics of the survey show that many customers visit the Japanese restaurant with their kids, then the restaurant might provide a special kids meal for children to attract more customers who have kids. Additionally, the survey should be customized to recognize other attributes that are related to location and corresponding demographics.

The survey presented here is based on a review of related research studies. It is designed to ask customers of Japanese restaurants in the US about their perceptions of 25 attributes related to food, service, atmosphere, and others (Liu & Jang, 2009). In part two of the questionnaire, as seen in Appendix B, respondents are asked to rate the importance of each item in contributing to their satisfaction. Ratings are according to a 7-point likert scale, from 1 being “not important” to 7 being “extremely important”.

Part three of the questionnaire, as seen Appendix C, asks customers about how their satisfaction and behavioral intention reflect their overall restaurant experience. As with the attributes, customer satisfaction and behavioral intention will also be measured by using a 7-point likert scale, from 1 being “strongly disagree” to “7 strongly agree”. In this part, restaurant operators can measure overall customer satisfaction by using expectancy disconfirmation theory. Basically, this method involves subtracting customer expectation from customer satisfaction. A positive outcome shows that the restaurant’s service quality was better than expected. In contrast, a negative outcome means the performance or the service quality of the restaurant was lower than expected.

Sample Survey

The purpose of the sample survey is to provide guidelines for restaurateurs to properly design and analyze their own survey. The results from the sample survey have nothing to do with the actual survey results. The sample survey only provides instructional steps for understanding and analyzing the data.

Appendix D shows the result of the demographic characteristics of respondents. Restaurateurs have to target the right market for their restaurant before they develop the

marketing plan. According to data, there were more female customers than male customers by 19.4%. The result explains that female customers are more likely to visit Japanese restaurants. Therefore, restaurant operators should develop a marketing plan to attract more female customers such as half-off on Monday night only for women. These demographic findings and results will provide better understanding of restaurant customers and help restaurant operators to attract more customers.

Upon completion of demographic characteristic data analysis, the mean ranking of each attribute should be computed. These numbers represents the importance level of each attribute on Japanese food and services from the American customers. Restaurateurs should rank them and list all the means just like in Appendix E. The closer the mean of each attribute is to 7, the more important that attribute is to the customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions of Americans in Japanese restaurants. Many of the attributes have better scores than average (higher than 4.00), except for music, lighting, and other attributes. The most important attribute for American customers was found to be the taste of food, which attribute is extremely important according to the sample data results when American customer decide on which Japanese restaurant to dine at. According to this result, there are also very important attributes following taste of food. A restaurant operator must also recognize these attributes in order to attract more customers. As a result, restaurateurs should focus on the highest ranked attributes and develop appropriate marketing strategies to achieve higher customer satisfaction and revisit retention.

Actual survey in focus group

The actual survey could be distributed to American customers who are invited to Japanese restaurants in the US through dining frequency programs. A frequent dining program is

a type of loyalty program that many restaurants use to attract customers to return by creating loyalty and developing relationships with customers. Restaurant operators should invite those loyal customers to participate in the survey after having experienced Japanese food and services. These loyal customers could be the focus group.

Hyden and Bulow (2003) mentioned that focus groups “have often been regarded as a means for obtaining access to people’s experiences, attitudes and views.” Reflecting upon this phrase, distributing surveys within this focus group is a great way for gauging real time perception of American customers and it will provide rich, quality, and reliable data based on their experiences and views. Focus group sizes may vary depending on the size of the restaurant, but it must be an ideal size group to account for other American customers in the US. According to Lehoux, Poland, Daudelin’s study (2006) suggests that the ideal size of focus group should be 6 to 12 people.

Therefore, the number of American customers (participants) for this survey should be between 6 to 12 people. The survey should be distributed by restaurant operators to customers who have finished dining. Participants will not be required to complete the survey because participation will be on a voluntary basis. Customers will have different perspectives on attributes and behaviors based on demographics and their knowledge of Japanese food. Thus, this study suggests restaurateurs that should distribute demographic surveys first. The results from the survey will be collected from those American customers who are invited to Japanese restaurants in the US. In order to obtain more reliable results, a minimum 7 days of survey distribution should be executed including weekends prior to analysis. There are other factors influencing data such as holidays, busy days, and days better or worse staffs are working.

Weekends are usually busy days, for that reason, poor service might occur. So, this equal survey allocation will generate more accurate information.

Survey results and analysis

The survey will provide two results: 1) the demographic and dining characteristics of American customers of Japanese restaurants; and 2) attributes in Japanese restaurants perceived by them to be important. Based on the results of the demographic survey, restaurant operators should develop more creative and innovative marketing plans to target the right demographic in order to maximize the restaurant profit. For example, if families usually visit the restaurant with their kids, then restaurateurs should create an appropriate kids' meal menu to target those family-oriented customers.

Based on the results of the importance of attributes in Japanese food and services, restaurant operators should focus on understanding customer needs and wants, and develop a strategy to maximize customer satisfaction and revisit rate. For example, if a customer thinks that food handling and sanitation is the most important attribute can result in their satisfaction, then Japanese restaurant operators should provide a higher level of training on food handling and hygiene for the employees than required by law. Also, restaurant supervisors must pay attention to the cleanliness of the sushi bar and chefs to maintain clean and sanitary conditions. Restaurateurs should see this process as an important investment in their goal of restaurant development. Preparing for changes and keeping up with customers' perceptions is the best way to be successful in the restaurant business.

Conclusion

Understanding customer perceptions of a product or service is vital to gaining insight into their needs and wants (Leblanc, 1992). This understanding will enable restaurants to achieve a competitive advantage, and tailor their strategies to generate higher customer satisfaction and revisit intention.

This study has practical implications for Japanese restaurant operators. It suggests that restaurant operators need to understand American customer perceptions of Japanese restaurants, and identify the essential attributes of Japanese food and services that influence customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. This study will help to generate information for Japanese restaurant operators about the strengths and weaknesses of their food and services. Specifically, it will assist operators in identifying areas needing improvement operationally as well as suggesting a direction for marketing strategy. In effect, it will assist Japanese restaurants in gaining a competitive edge (Aaker & Shansby, 1982), as well as becoming even more popular in the United States.

Recommendations

A focus group is very limited due to numbers of participants and time constraints. In order to get more generalizable outcomes, larger numbers of surveys need to be conducted. Restaurateurs can execute surveys through an online survey system to obtain more accurate information from a greater number of participants. Additionally, the survey form should be customized depending on the restaurant location, because customer perception may be influenced by the geographic factors such as weather, location, and the surrounding environment.

Restaurateurs can measure the performance of the overall restaurant by using part two of the questionnaire, as seen in Appendix B. The respondents are asked to rate the performance of

each item in contributing to their satisfaction. Ratings are according to a 7-point likert scale, from 1 being “very poor” to 7 being “outstanding”. These findings will investigate the areas where improvement is necessary and direct restaurant managers as far as areas needing improvement. This performance evaluation should be executed on a regular basis and consistently to improve overall restaurant performance.

Appendix A

Demographic characteristics

| | |
|---|---|
| Gender | 1) Male 2) Female |
| Age | 1) 20 & under 2) 21 – 34 years 3) 35 – 44 years 4) 45 – 55 years 5) 55 – 64 years 6) 65 & older |
| Marital status | 1) Single 2) Married 3) Divorce 4) Widow |
| Dining companion | 1) Alone 2) Family 3) Relatives 4) Friends (couple) 5) Business colleagues 6) Other |
| Income | 1) Less than \$20,000 2) \$20,001 – \$40,000 3) \$40,001 – \$60,000 4) \$60,001 - \$80,000 5) \$80,001 - \$100,000 6) \$100,001 or above |
| Number of Visits to Japanese restaurants | How many times have you dined at a Japanese restaurant? _____ |

Appendix B

Attribute importance ratings

| | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
|--|---|
| | <i>Extremely unimportant ----Neutral ----->Extremely important</i> |
| Food | |
| Taste | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Freshness | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Presentation | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Temperature | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Nutrients and ingredients | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Healthy options | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Cleanliness and sanitation | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Food authenticity | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Service | |
| Friendly and helpful employees | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Attentive employees | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Employees' knowledge of the Japanese food and drinks | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Prompt service | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Dependable and consistent service | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Accurate bill | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Service authenticity | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Atmosphere | |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Lighting | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Music | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Interior design and decoration | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Cleanliness of employee appearance | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Cleanliness of restaurant (sushi bar) | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Restaurant temperature | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Restaurant authenticity | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Other attributes | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Price fairness | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Restaurant location | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |

Appendix C

Customer satisfaction and behavioral intention ratings

| | |
|--|--|
| | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| | <i>Strongly agree -----Neutral ---->Strongly disagree</i> |
| Customer satisfaction | |
| My expectation of this restaurant was high | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| I am satisfied with this restaurant | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| Behavioral intention | |
| I would like to come back to this restaurant in the future | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |
| I would say positive things about this restaurant to others | 1----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 |

Appendix D

Sample survey results (Demographic characteristic)

| Demographic | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Gender | Male: 46.3 % Female: 53.7 % |
| Age | 20 & under: 5% 21 – 34 years: 20% 35 – 44 years: 35% 45 – 55 years: 20% 55 – 64 years: 10% 65 & older: 10% |
| Marital status | Single: 38% Married: 55% Divorce: 5% Widow: 2% |
| Dining companion | Alone: 20% Family: 45% Relatives: 5% Friends (couple): 15% Business colleagues: 5% Other: 10% |
| Income | Less than \$20,000: 2% \$20,001 – \$40,000: 20% \$40,001 – \$60,000: 38% \$60,001 - \$80,000: 20% \$80,001 - \$100,000: 15% \$100,001 or above: 5% |
| Number of visits to Japanese restaurants | 5.6 times (average) |

Appendix E

Sample survey results (Importance of attributes on Japanese food and services)

| Rank | Attributes | Mean |
|-------------|--|-------------|
| 1 | Taste | 6.84 |
| 2 | Freshness | 6.72 |
| 3 | Cleanliness of restaurant (sushi bar) | 6.51 |
| 4 | Cleanliness and sanitation | 6.45 |
| 5 | Friendly and helpful employee | 6.42 |
| 6 | Service authenticity | 6.35 |
| 7 | Cleanliness of employee appearance | 6.27 |
| 8 | Presentation | 6.14 |
| 9 | Price fairness | 6.02 |
| 10 | Attentive employee | 5.95 |
| 11 | Dependable and consistent service | 5.86 |
| 12 | Employee's knowledge of the Japanese foods and drinks | 5.74 |
| 13 | Healthy options | 5.72 |
| 14 | Service authenticity | 5.64 |
| 15 | Food authenticity | 5.52 |
| 16 | Prompt service | 5.47 |
| 17 | Restaurant authenticity | 5.42 |
| 18 | Temperature (food) | 5.12 |
| 19 | Interior design and decoration | 4.86 |
| 20 | Nutrient and ingredient | 4.72 |
| 21 | Lighting | 4.25 |
| 22 | Music | 4.10 |
| 23 | Restaurant temperature | 3.96 |
| 24 | Restaurant location | 3.24 |
| 25 | Other attributes | 3.13 |

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