

Personal recommendations still drive consumer choice when eating out

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A survey has found that 80% of respondents see word-of-mouth as having the greatest influence on their perception of different places to eat out – four times more than Social Media. Furthermore, when choosing where to eat out, personal recommendations are twice as influential as a previous experience, special offers/vouchers or TripAdvisor, according to the research into the UK's eating out market by HospitalityGEM.

Familiarity is key when eating out in the local area, with 56% of respondents opting to visit somewhere they have previously had a great experience. The statistics demonstrate that consumers value the reliability of a brand they know, making consistency of the offering vital if a brand is to remain front of mind. However, when visiting a town or city for the first time 71% of respondents would seek somewhere they have never heard of, simply because it might be interesting. This highlights the importance of first impressions, yet these are often driven by the last impressions of recent visitors. When deliberating over where to eat out, 60% of respondents spend 10-15 minutes consulting with others, 27% take up to an hour evaluating different options, whilst 13% prefer to decide in a couple of minutes based on perceptions they already have.

Three quarters of respondents (75%) would be 'very likely' to stay longer than planned, perhaps opting to have another course if they were having a great meal experience, while just five per cent of those asked responded 'not very likely.'

The factors most likely to spoil a venue's reputation vary depending on the trading format. In restaurants, as one might expect, guests are least tolerant of food not being up to scratch – this was cited by 81% of respondents. This dropped to 58% for pubs and 43% for coffee shops. Poor organisation and timing was also significant – in coffee shops, 42% thought this was the most important factor (followed by 30% for pubs and just 13% for restaurants). But perhaps the most interesting result was that only six per cent of respondents felt that in restaurants they would be least tolerant of a robotic service style (this rose to 12% for pubs and 15% for coffee shops). This indicates that 'personality', the main focus of many a brand in recent years, should be viewed as the icing on the cake – getting the product right, and being super-organised in the way it is delivered must form the foundations.

When dining in a restaurant 81% of respondents said they would be least tolerant to the food not being up to expectations, even though the team who served them were very friendly and the organisation/timing was good. In contrast, 13% would be least tolerant of poor organisation and timings and only six per cent would be least tolerant to a robotic service style.

When visiting a pub or bar 58% of respondents said they would be least tolerant to the food not being up to expectations, even though the team who served them were very friendly and the organisation/timing was good. In contrast, 30% would be least tolerant of poor organisation and timings and only 12% would be least tolerant to a robotic service style.

Steven Pike, Managing Director of HospitalityGEM commented: "The survey provides fantastic insight into what influences consumer thinking when choosing where to eat out. Remarkably, despite all the fuss surrounding Social Media, four times as many respondents felt they were influenced by face-to-face discussions, which demonstrates how vital it is for operators to manage the guest experience to ensure consistent delivery of their offering. Operators also cannot ignore the impact first impressions have on consumers, and especially amongst those looking to experience something new.

"Maximising the guest experience is not solely about the quality of the product offering. It is also about the organisation, timing and how a team engage with the customer, which must all work seamlessly in harmony with an operators brand values. Three quarters of those surveyed said they would stay longer and spend more if the service was good – so who says service is not about sales? A great experience can help to increase dwell time, which will then encourage a team to upsell, as well as encouraging customers to return again and again."