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# THE ART OF ENGAGEMENT

Employees as your customers

BY SHARON OLSON

**T**he line between customer and employee is not always clear, especially in today's deli and foodservice operations. Consumers under 35 are among the most sought-after customers, and they are also vitally important to the workforce. This year's study explored specific aspects of the workplace experience in the retail food industry and the significant impact this experience has on employees' personal food and foodservice decisions.

The Y-Pulse survey collected insights and opinions from consumers age 35 and under about their experiences at work and their choices when dining out or purchasing food away from home. Of the more than 1,400 survey participants who worked in retail food establishments, more than 400 worked in deli operations. The survey included workers with direct customer contact as well as those working in the back-of-the-house operations.

The food industry employs more than 14.7 million people, according to the Washington, D.C.-based National Restaurant Association. The perception of jobs in the food industry as being mind-numbing choices of last resort employment does not reflect the opinions of the majority of the respondents in this survey. Indeed, the majority of those surveyed said they want to continue working in foodservice for a full-time career. That sentiment increases with experience; among employees with four or more years of experience, 75 percent want to continue working in the business. Eighty-seven percent of those with four or more years of experience would recommend their employer to someone who wanted to work in foodservice.

Foodservice employees interviewed for this study said managers who pitch in and help at peak periods earn their respect and make the workplace more enjoyable.

Employees also noted managers who have been promoted from entry-level jobs give them a clear view of the opportunities that might be available to them.

## The Pleasures Of The Food Business

There are a lot of different jobs in the food business, some more appealing than others, yet more positive experiences were reported than negative ones. Eighty-three percent of survey participants reported they liked their foodservice job. Among deli employees, 92 percent had a job they liked and 88 percent said they would recommend their employer to someone who wanted to work in foodservice. Some of the reasons mentioned for liking a job in the deli business more than restaurants were higher pay, benefits and the chance to get to know their customers who visit regularly. Eighty-six percent said they liked dealing with customers at their job and 87



their coworkers were their friends, and the percentage was even higher for deli employees at 94 percent.

**Experience Shapes Expectations**

Previous Y-Pulse studies have revealed younger consumers pay great attention to how employers treat their employees and that it affects their decisions when dining out. This study took a closer look at the relationship that exists between co-workers and their management. Ninety-three percent of the employees said they seek out restaurants that treat their employees well when they dine out. Because of their work experience, they are able to spot subtleties related to management behaviors that the average consumer might not notice. Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed said great management impacts their overall experience positively when they dine out.

Experiences at work also create a service expectation when employees dine out, as 83 percent compare their away

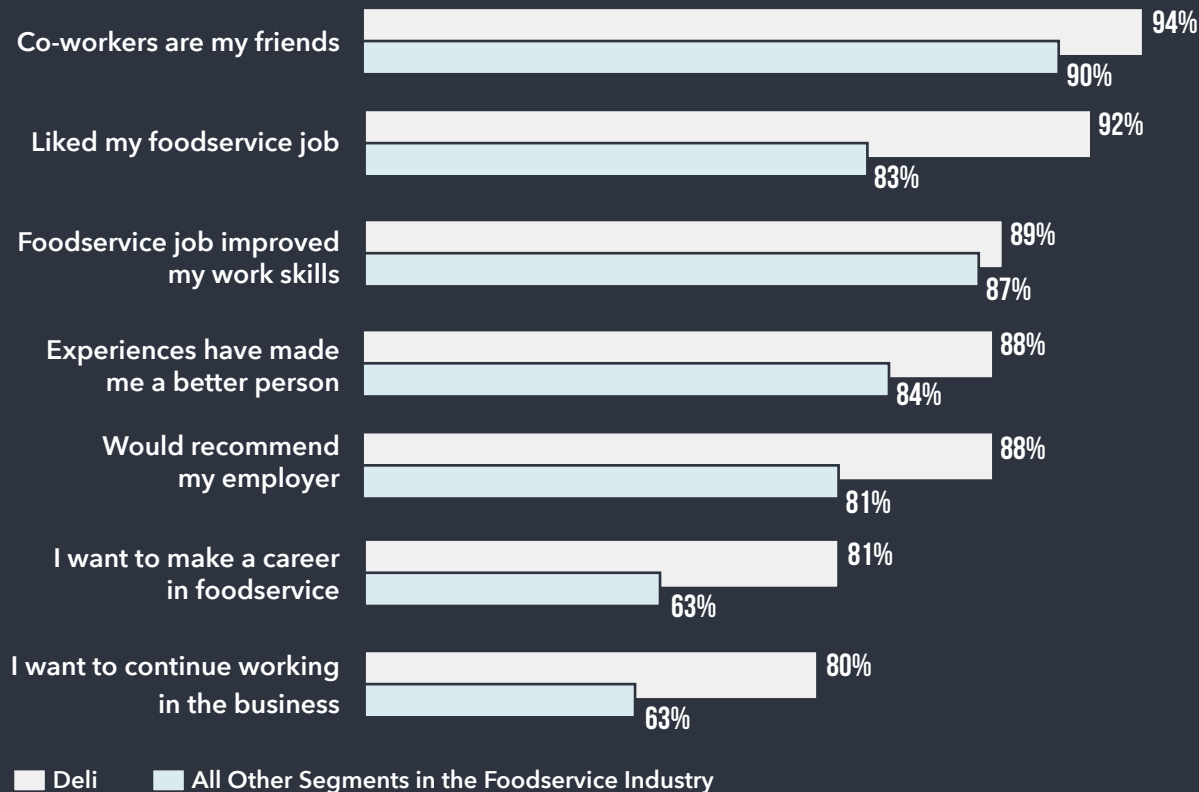
percent enjoyed helping customers find something delicious to eat. The food business has a way of connecting people whether they are working or enjoying a meal. The vast majority of those surveyed (89 percent) agreed that

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## EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Job satisfaction is high and deli employees tend to be more satisfied than those in other segments of the food industry.



Source: Y-Pulse® (ypulse.org) 2017

Figures show % agreeing with statement

from home experience to their experience at work. Ninety-three percent of those surveyed also said they were able to tell when a restaurant had good food safety or cleanliness practices.

Those who have an insider's perspective from working in the foodservice industry can be even more impatient with poor service when they dine out. Eighty-five percent said they were more critical of service in a restaurant than before they started working in the foodservice industry.

On the other hand, experience gained from working in the foodservice industry provides employees/customers with a better understanding of the difficulties faced by their counterparts when dining out. They are able to appreciate the efforts and professionalism of other employees, even when off duty. As a result, those who work in the industry are more inclined to give second chances, with 83 percent saying they usually give a restaurant a second chance if the dining experience didn't meet their expectations.

## It is a true testimony to a foodservice establishment when its employees want to dine there on their own time.

Great service also drives return visits, with 90 percent in agreement that service is a key factor in their decision to return again to a restaurant.

### Pride in the Workplace

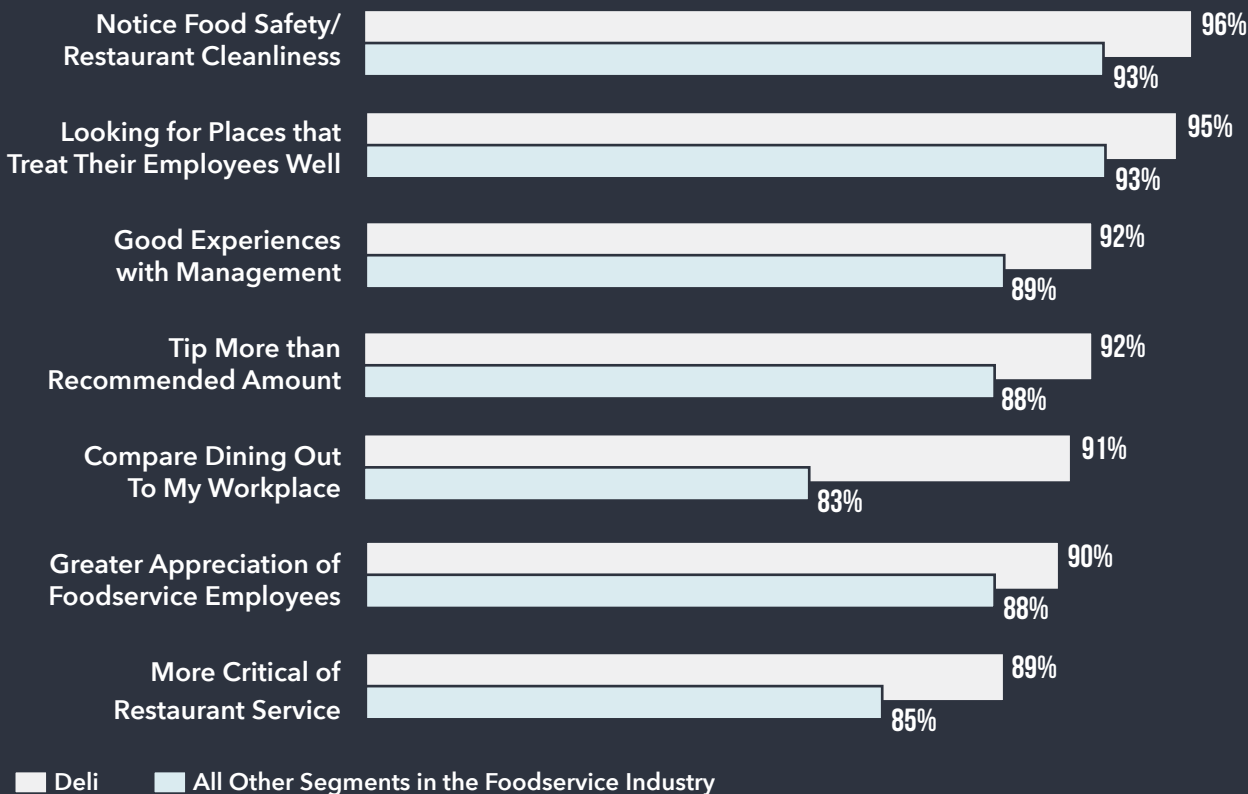
When employees are on the front lines with customers, their enthusiasm and sincerity can make a real difference. Seventy-two percent of employees surveyed said they enjoy eating where they work. Foodservice can be a very demanding job, and there are often restrictions

or incentives for employees to dine in the workplace. In higher end foodservice establishments, price points make it unrealistic for employees to dine at work, even with discounts. Yet, in many cases, employees appreciated employers' policies to provide food at no cost.

When asked about their perceptions of the quality of food where they work, 82 percent of the total sample said, "I am glad to work in a place that has really good food;" that percentage was even higher for deli employees at 88 percent.

## FOODSERVICE EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE DINING OUT BEHAVIOR

Workplace Experience Shape Expectations and Behaviors when Dining Out.



Source: Y-Pulse® (ypulse.org) 2017

Figures show % agreeing with statement

Perception of food quality drives employee preference to dine at their workplace; 84 percent indicated the quality of the food makes them want to eat where they work, and 91 percent of deli employees shared this sentiment. Seventy-nine percent of deli employees said, “I never get tired of the food where I work.”

### When Employees Become Customers

It is a true testimony to a foodservice establishment when its employees want to dine there on their own time. Seventy-five percent of respondents said that seeing how their co-workers treat customers determines whether they will eat at their workplace when they are off duty.

One restaurant manager interviewed for this survey stated that having employees eating at their workplace was good for business. “When I see employees getting off work and eating in the lobby or at a table, I think of it as free marketing to advocate how good our product is.” However, a lot depends upon the type of business. For example, in some levels of fine dining, it would not be realistic to



expect employees to become customers, yet in casual dining, quick service and deli, it is a real possibility.

Working in foodservice creates a great deal of empathy for employees when dining out in other establishments. Eighty-

seven percent of those surveyed said they have a greater appreciation for foodservice employees since they started working in the foodservice industry. A majority of those who have worked in the foodservice industry tend to leave higher than the rec-

## WHEN EMPLOYEES BECOME ADVOCATES

Employees share their work experiences with friends and family. Their endorsement as someone with an insider’s perspective can give a big boost to businesses.



■ Deli ■ All Other Segments in the Foodservice Industry

Source: Y-Pulse® (ypulse.org) 2017

Figures show % agreeing with statement

ommended tip.

When people who work in the foodservice industry dine out, a significant majority says they are also willing to pay more for ethically-produced meals. Eighty-four percent say they appreciate restaurants that use natural and organic ingredients.

### Employees As Advocates

There are few better advocates for a foodservice establishment than those who work in the back-of-the-house and know the inside stories on ingredients, preparation methods and attention to food safety. Eighty-six percent of those surveyed who said they had back-of-the-house jobs, also said the quality of the food where they work makes them want to eat there, and 84 percent said they recommend their place of work to others.

Consumers under 35 years old, in general, consider themselves to be opinion leaders in many subject areas. Those who work in the food business often become the person in the know to make dining out recommendations. In this study, 76 percent of those surveyed said their friends consider them to be a "foodie." Furthermore, 72 percent said that when dining out with friends, they are the one making suggestions on what to order.

Today's employees also understand and appreciate how important reputation can be; 86 percent said reputation was important to them in making choices. Committed employees want to contribute to an establishment's good reputation. Some restaurant employees interviewed for this survey revealed that more than two negative comments about them on a social media platform were grounds for termination. In some cases, employees mentioned that positive comments from customers on surveys were the basis for their bonuses.

Employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction go hand and in hand. Innovative programs to attract and retain the best employees certainly make a difference.

### A Fresh Perspective

Flexible schedules appeal to employees who want to balance their life, family and work on their terms. Personal time off (PTO) has become the benefit in demand offered by most major employers in the food business. Conventional schedules and routines are far less appealing in today's "gig economy," where employees want to craft their own work experience. Yet right-sizing flexibility may also make it eas-

## TOP CULTURE CHARACTERISTICS THAT INFLUENCE EMPLOYEE'S CHOICES OF WHERE TO DINE OUT

**Q:** When it comes to your dining out experiences, how do you feel about the following statements?

*Top 2 scores were "Strongly Agree" and "Agree."*

1. Good Food Safety or Cleanliness Practices - 96%
2. Seek Out Restaurants that Treat Employees Well - 95%
3. Great Experiences with Management - 92%
4. Great Customer Service - 92%
5. Restaurant's Reputation - 90%

Source: Y-Pulse® (ypulse.org) 2017

ier to fill traditionally less desirable shifts, like nights and holidays.

Major chain restaurants offer benefit programs with health insurance starting on day one. This may add some initial extra cost, but employers who are able to demonstrate they care about their employees in tangible ways earn their loyalty.

401K programs and stock options also make employees feel valued and appreciated as part of the team that is making the business successful.

Programs like tuition assistance and scholarships let employees know they are valued for more than the task at hand. Some forward-thinking quick service restaurants recognize that not every employee may choose to make their career in the food business, but their employees could easily become customers for life based on their good experience with that first job.

### The Ultimate Customer Experience

With so many great competitors in the industry, customer satisfaction has moved far beyond the basics. Some successful

retailers go so far as to say that it is a matter of seduction, using the charms of great service and unique product offerings to make customers choose their store over so many others. That personal connection with employees and exceptional service are what can make the difference.

Technology makes it easier to find options and reviews when making a decision about an establishment, but food remains a very personal choice, and a lot of factors can come into consideration. Experiences at work have shaped dining habits for 82 percent of those surveyed. Thinking about both the customer experience and your employees' perspective might provide some fresh ideas to enhance the experience you deliver. **DB**

*Sharon Olson is the executive director of Y-Pulse® a division of Olson Communications based in Chicago. Y-Pulse (ypulse.org) is a research and consulting practice that specializes in helping companies in the food business better understand tomorrow's tastemakers today.*