Research on Food Allergy Information using Smart Mobile Media Devices to Enhance Communication at Restaurants

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ABSTRACT
Dealing with food allergies in the restaurant industry is becoming important as more customers have needs and restaurants are concerned with corporate social responsibility (CSR). This research discusses how to provide information to facilitate the communication between the restaurant industry that is interested in dealing with food allergies and the patient’s family who wants to enjoy eating at restaurants. The authors used a mixed method, combining qualitative and quantitative research, and divided the research into three steps (Creswell, 2008). First, the authors researched patients’ families and companies to organize communication. The authors conducted an interview with Company A, a big company in the restaurant industry, to parallel the research of patients’ families. In the second step, they developed a tool and verified the method of obtaining information. Lastly, to verify the effectiveness of the information providing measure, they set up a focus group consisting of responders from the questionnaire given to parents who have children with food allergies. They found that the lack of information about ingredients and the lack of knowledge of the employees when patients’ families are selecting from the menu are responsible for the inconsiderate customer service and misses in operation.

Keywords: Consumer Communication, Enhanced Restaurant Communication, Food Allergy Information, Restaurant Industry, Smart Mobile Media Devices

INTRODUCTION
For the restaurant industry in Japan, dealing with food allergies is a societal obligation, a part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, and is perceived as having a tendency to cater to customers with special needs. However, with environmental changes, such as the aging population, increasing health consciousness, and rising numbers of foreigners, it is not dif-
It is difficult to imagine that an increasing amount of people would have diet limitations due to various circumstances, like age, changes in one’s body, changes in one’s daily life, or religious reasons. It depends on the restaurant’s target market, but services demanded of the restaurant industry, including cooking methods that facilitates eating and digestion, menus focusing on grains and vegetables, and foods appropriate for certain religions, are expected to become even more varied in the future.

When deciding how to deal with food allergies, it is necessary to provide information about the food along with the food themselves. The involvement of business is required in many aspects of the restaurant, especially menu formulation, methods of obtaining the ingredients, maintenance of the ingredients’ information, cooking and storage of the ingredients at the restaurant, the design of the operation until the meal is placed on the table, and employee training. In other words, food allergies can only be dealt with after designing or reengineering the entire restaurant service. If dealing with food allergies is achieved as a result of the service as a whole, do the restaurant industry members perceive dealing with food allergies not as a societal obligation separate from the other services, but as part of the overall business goal, meaning is there a need for them to perceive it as a form of customer service and judge how to handle the situation accordingly?

The objective of this research is to “suggest” how to provide information to facilitate the communication between the restaurant industry that is interested in dealing with food allergies and the food allergy patient’s family who wants to enjoy eating out. To improve the customers’ experience, this research proposes a set of steps that are meant to enable customers to choose from the menu with confidence and enjoy their meals, to minimize the difficulties for restaurant managers that come with a high turnover rate from hiring part-time staff, and to create an environment where the employees are able to provide excellent service to increase customer satisfaction. This research presents three steps in developing an understanding of how to enhance communications in the restaurant industry in Japan:

1. Organize the communication concerning food allergies to better service.
2. Identify factors that improve communication and establish new measures.
3. Verify the effectiveness of information offered (experiment using a development tool).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the restaurant industry has suffered from a weak economy, deflation, and shortage of labor, but has gained favorable reaction from customers with food allergies and those customers’ families by developing allergen-free menus and providing nutritional information with big restaurant chains leading the way in establishing methods to deal with food allergies. However, there is still a gap between what the restaurants offer and what the customers expect. Saito and Ogawa (2009) found from analyzing the interview using the grounded theory approach, that allergy patient families have needs to eat out, as all families. But these families expressed difficulty in selecting each of their meals due to the lack of information about the menu items and the time it takes to comprehend the menu because each restaurant listed the information in a different way. Also, when customers were unable to make the decision themselves and asked the servers when they made a return trip to the restaurant, they were unimpressed by the servers’ lack of knowledge about food allergies and their inability to clarify menu descriptions.

How many people require the restaurant to make arrangements due to food allergies? The proportion of people with food allergies varies by research finding (Table 1). The welfare labor science research (2003) found that the proportion decreases in older age groups, with 10% among infants, 4-5% for 3-year-olds, 2-3% for K-12 students, and 1-2% among adults. Takayanagi’s research of Fuji Pharma’s sales
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