Chapter 14

Co-Creation between Food Allergy Customers and Restaurants using Mobile Devices

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ABSTRACT

Dealing with food allergies in the restaurant industry is becoming more important as more customers have needs, and restaurants are concerned with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The objective of this chapter is to suggest how to provide information to facilitate the communication between the restaurant industry and the food allergy customers’ families who want to enjoy dining out. As the first step, the authors conduct an interview with a major company in the restaurant industry to parallel the research of food allergy customers’ families in order to identify communication problems. In the second step, they develop a mobile service to support communication between customers and restaurants. Lastly, as the third step, the authors set up a focus group interview to verify usability of the mobile service. They find that there are many customers (9-55%), who are allergic to the 7 specific allergens, but there are also customers who are allergic to ingredients exceed from the 25 allergens, such as sesame (12%), and who are allergic to multiple ingredients. The authors found that the lack of information about ingredients and the lack of knowledge of the employees are responsible for the inconsiderate customer service and misses in operation, leading to communication problems. The results of the study reveal co-creation strategies enhance customer knowledge of food and create a shared environment of information value. The communication support tool utilizing the touch panel mobile device developed in this study gained favorable reviews from customers’ families.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, restaurant chains or fast-food chains in Japan have gained favorable evaluation from customers with food allergies and those customers’ families. Some of big food service chains have led the way in establishing methods to deal with food allergies by developing allergen-free menus and providing raw material information via mutual media, such as websites and/or mobile site, customer support via telephone, traditional printed documents prepared at the store front and so on. There is, however, still a gap between what the restaurants offer and what customers expect. Saito and Ogawa (2009) found from analyzing interview data, using the grounded theory approach, those allergy consumer 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 ingredients 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 for information, they were unimpressed by the servers’ lack of knowledge about food allergies and their inability to clarify menu descriptions.

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 the rising numbers of foreigners, it is not 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, certain oils, 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 contents. 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, from food information, order taking, to food preparation processes, including purchasing raw materials. If dealing with food allergies is achieved as a result of the service as a whole, will 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. Is there a need for restaurants to perceive it as a form of customer service and judge how to handle the situation accordingly? How can restaurateurs and customers work together to generate value using co-creation processes?

The objective of this research is to suggest how to enhance co-creation processes to provide information to facilitate the communication between the restaurant firm that is interested in dealing with food allergies and customers who suffered from food allergy and also who wants to enjoy eating out. To improve the customers’ experience, this research proposes a set of co-creation 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 deal with a high turnover rate from hiring part-time staff, and to create an environment where employees are able to provide excellent service to increase customer satisfaction. This research presents three co-creation steps in developing an understanding of how to enhance communications in the restaurant industry in Japan: