# The Influence of Customer Focus on Food Safety Behaviour in Food Service Sector.

Veronika Bulochova<sup>1</sup>, Ellen W. Evans<sup>1</sup>, Claire Haven-Tang<sup>2</sup> and Elizabeth C. Redmond<sup>1</sup>

(1) ZERO2FIVE Food Industry Centre, Food and Drink Research Unit, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK. (2) Welsh Centre for Tourism Research, Cardiff School of Management, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, United Kingdom \*Corresponding author: vbulochova@cardiffmet.ac.uk



## Introduction

One of the main goals of the food service sector is to satisfy customer demands alongside taking all reasonable steps to ensure food safety.

The importance of positive food safety culture in food service establishments is widely acknowledged and is a paramount internal driver to food safety implementation (2, 12, 16). However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the external factors, such as customer focus on food safety behaviour.

Determining if customer focus may impact food handler food safety implementation is crucial for understanding how to establish an effective food service environment and for training and intervention design in food service industry.

## Purpose

The study aimed to explore how customer focus may impact food handler food safety compliance using qualitative analysis of stakeholder perceptions.

## Methods

### **Study Design:**

Interview schedules, informed by a preceding literature review were designed for this study. In-depth interviews were carried out with three groups of stakeholders:

- Experts, such as representatives of academia, regulatory authorities and environmental health officers (n=11);
- Food service managers, including owners, general managers, employees carrying out managerial duties (n=9);
- Food service employees, including chefs, waiters, baristas and workers in non-managerial roles (n=4).

### Data Analysis:

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and the content of the interviews was qualitatively analysed.

Perceptions, such as business targets, customer-focused goals, customer expectations, customer pressure, risk perception and improvement suggestions were compared among the groups with considerations for food safety implementation.

Ethical Approval: Approval was obtained from the Health Care and Food Ethics Committee at Cardiff Metropolitan University (Reference no.: PGR-5508).

## Results and discussion

This study identified three core themes discussed by the interview participants regarding the influence of customer focus in food service environment: 1. implementation of food safety tasks; 2. business priorities; 3. risk perception.

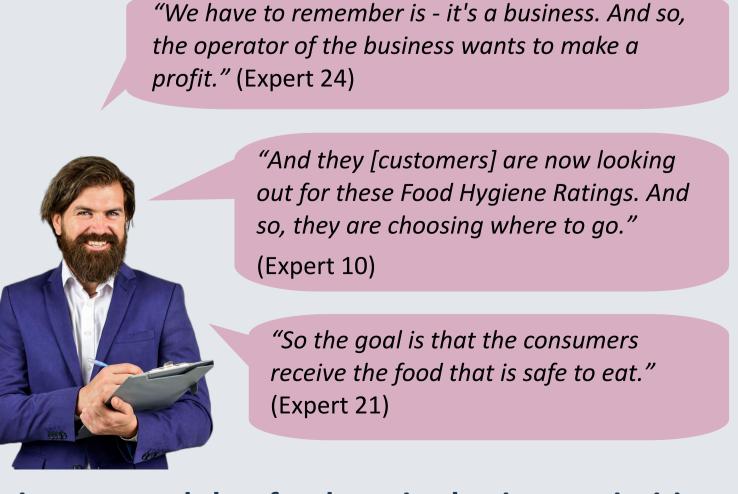
## 1. The influence of customer focus on the implementation of food safety tasks

#### Practical implication **Summary of interviewee comments** Stress caused by customer pressure Customer expectations The experts in this study stated that customer expectations to receive good quality food prepared quickly are It is suggested in this study that cultivating positive food safety climate "But like I say, if you've got the right team behind you, it "People want things fast and cheap" (Expert 24) shouldn't really be that stressful." (Expert 12) high, and this puts pressure on the employees. However, experts agreed that effective teamwork and a within the team could reduce employee stress during busy service positive food safety climate could reduce the stress and ensure food safety implementation. In previous periods, encourage balanced prioritisation of tasks and improve food research food service establishments with positive food safety cultures had fewer food safety violations (5). Considering the barriers which may occur due to customer demands, In this study managers expressed an opinion that food service is "customer-focused", and that consumers "I think the expectations customers mean they're not "Even if the situation isn't pressurised, you can make it understanding the pressures we're under. If something have "high expectations". This creates pressures, such as the need for the business to prepare food pressurized by like really focusing on the standards require such as the lack of time, it is vital that food service managers encourage takes a long time, it's because we're doing it and the level required." (Manager 13) quickly and the need for high quality, ensuring financial success. Managers acknowledged that such pressure food safety prioritisation. Therefore, this study suggests that clear properly.." (Supervisor 3) communication between the management and employees, stating that may lead to stress if customers become unhappy with the wait or service, creating a situation the workers "If they're [customers] impatient -we end up getting hassafeguarding customer health must come before the speed of service, is may skip essential food safety practices. In previous research the emphasis on performing food safety "Customers think that they want things quickly. And I tened and skip the task. " (Supervisor 3) don't think that that's right. But I do think that that's practices by the managers and colleagues was shown to positively impact employee safe food handling and what is expected." (Manager 6) effective leadership by the management help establish appropriate food safety norms (3, 8, 13, 14, 15). "If you have a customer who is angry with you because their food is taking a long time, then that makes you want to just get it out of the way faster." (Manager 6) "Whereas in my head the priority now is the customer, It is suggested in this study that it is vital to provide food handlers with a Food service employees shared emotional struggles and stress regarding customer expectations and the need because that's the one that is demanding. That's kind of the

## 2. The influence of customer focus on the business priorities

Experts and management representatives discussed how customer focus determines business priorities.

- Experts spoke of the need to safeguard consumer health, whilst management focused on consumer demands in terms of food products and service.
- Managers and experts highlighted the importance of food service business profitability as a core factor determining the longevity of the business which is facilitated by customer satisfaction, as shown in previous
- Customer awareness of food safety rating information was acknowledged, and the use of displayed food hygiene information was highlighted as a competitive advantage for businesses with high rating.



"Don't get me wrong - business has to exist." (Manager 13)

"You have to look few months before n advance] to understand what you have to bring to give your customers, or (Business owner 11) "At the end of the day— Head Offi



"So what we have here is

very much focused on the

ransaction." (Manager 13

experience over just a

to be understood. This study suggests that because of their immediate nature, customer demands often

become a priority before the food safety implementation. As shown in previous research, barriers, such as

Moreover, task complexity, such as a complicated menu have been shown to negatively impact safe food

tasks appropriately may also have a negative impact on employee wellbeing and food safety culture.

handling (18). As a result, this study suggests that the competing priorities and the inability to complete the

lack of time may increase stress and affect the employee ability to implement food safety appropriately (4, 7).

It is suggested that food service business priorities may be heavily influenced by the customer focused goals in terms of delivering safe and good quality and providing good service to achieve profitability. However, profitability should not be prioritised over consumer safety, and a balanced prioritisation must be achieved.

## 3. The influence of customer focus on the risk perception

"Because it's a hard industry and nobody realises how

"Sometimes the customers are very frustrating, you

know." (Employee 27)

All interview respondents shared the perception of risk of customer foodborne illness and the implications of such incidents. High level of awareness of risk was expressed by all interviewees. However experts, management and employees perceived the implications of a foodborne illness incident differently.

- Experts focused on the wide effects a customer foodborne illness incident could have on the business and industry reputation;
- Managers shared the fear of customers getting foodborne illness and indicated awareness of legal and moral responsibility in case of such event.
- Employees described a lack of communication when customer foodborne illness occurs, because such incidents are reportedlybeing dealt with by the senior employees. Interestingly, one employee perceived the risk associated with food prepared in the establishment as low, because all the staff received meals there and trusted that the food was safe. As a result, they also perceived a low risk of foodborne illness to the customers.
- It is suggested that different perceptions of the implications of customer foodborne illness may create a misunderstanding between the different roles in food service. Better communication between the experts, management and employees regarding the foodborne illness incidence, implications and preventative measures may strengthen understanding and make food service workers more food safety compliant.

## Conclusion

balanced working environment, making food safety implementation

achievable in terms of time and quality. In addition, creating ways in

which the business could communicate to the customers the importance

of food safety practices and that they will take time is essential and may

alleviate the pressure put on food handlers by the customer

urgent need at the moment. And it's sort of the thing that

"So, we have, we normally have like a 20 minute "push line

to get our food out. So, 20 minutes - it seems like a lot of

time. But when we got a full restaurant and only two chefs

can be seen. Whereas maybe like washing your hands,

spending a long time, can't be seen in the long

on the line- it is a struggle..." (Chef 9)

term." (Employee 8)

"You will be picked up in the press or you will

and your business will probably fail."

common sense." (Manager 13)

happening." (Chef 9)

be humiliated, your customers won't trust you

The fear of like extreme event happening - no

ne wants it on their conscience.[...] People are

00% aware. Most of the time it doesn't even

need to be mentioned. It's very much kind of

"Nothing's ever really...It's kept quiet, it's kept

on the low. So, no one ever really knows what's

horror story. And that kind of shakes you up a

bit. But we also eat here ourselves."

This study suggests that customer expectations and pressure may create an imbalance between the business goals, prioritising speed and quality of service over safety and effective implementation of tasks, which in turn may negatively affect food safety culture in a food service establishment.

### Suggestions for improvement

ggestions to improve food safety implementation and at the same time to meet customer demands were made by the representatives of the food service sector:

- 1. Raising customer awareness that time is vitally important for food handlers to carry out their tasks in ensuring food safety in food service establishments: "We've got to figure out a way, you know, to communicate to the public: Food safety takes time." (Expert 24)
- 2. Simplifying the tasks to ensure that the goals are achievable and prioritising food safety: "We could cut the menu down dramatically. And we'd still have the customers in." (Chef 9)
- 3. Creating effective communication between the customers and the food service employees: "trying to create a space where you don't mind waiting a little bit." (Manager 13) and "communicating to the customers that we're sorry that they are waiting." (Supervisor 3)

## Significance of study

- This study determined the need to raise customer awareness that time is vitally important for the food handlers to carry out their tasks in ensuring food safety in food service establishments.
- Positive culture of food safety should be cultivated within food service establishments, facilitated by effective communication between the management and staff and by the leadership style, promoting the safeguarding of consumer health. This way customer focus could be balanced with food safety implementation.
- By providing food service employees with a balanced environment and addressing the barriers to food safety implementation the stress associated with customer focus may be reduced, resulting in a more effective food safety compliance. This in turn may result in an improvement of the reputation of a food service establishment and in higher profitability.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all interview participants for their involvement in the study. This research is funded by the ZERO2FIVE Food Industry Centre.

### References

- 1. Aung, N., and P. Tewogbola. 2019. The impact of emotional labor on the health in the workplace: a narrative review of literature from 2013–2018. AIMS Public Heal. 6:268–275.

- 8. Green, L. R., and C. Selman. 2005. Workers ' and Managers ' Safe Food Preparation Practices: A Qualitative Study INTRODUCTION. Food Prot. Trends 25:981–990.

- 18. Silva, C. T., M. P. Hakim, L. D. A. Zanetta, G. S. D. D. Pinheiro, S. F. B. Gemma, and D. T. da Cunha. 2021. Burnout and food safety: Understanding the role of job satisfaction and menu complexity in foodservice. Int. J. Hosp. Manag.

@vbulochova International Association for @Research\_Ellen

@Lfoodsafety @ClaireHavenTang @ZERO2FIVE\_ @CardiffMet @CardiffMetCSSHS

23a1a113/

linkedin.com/in/veronika-bulochova-73098219<mark>b/</mark> linkedin.com/in/ellen-evans-zero2five

