

# CAN CHILDREN AND ELDERLY BE SERVED IN THE SAME RESTAURANT?

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**Abstract:** Marketers try to reach children and elderly as their target market; therefore it will give opportunities for food industries to focus on these groups. Physiological, economic, social, psychological, and convenience factors are examined to discover the possibilities serving these different generations. It is concluded that serving children and elderly people in the same restaurant is possible as long as food service industries provide the right products and services for them.

**Keywords:** Children, elderly people, customer, food service concept.

It was a cold winter night on December 21<sup>st</sup> 2002, the author experienced something unusual in a *panekoekschip* restaurant in Groningen, Netherlands. An old woman and her granddaughter were eating pancakes in a very small square table that was only fit for two people. They were talking each other and really enjoyed their time eating in a very crowded restaurant. Another experience was noticed in Pizza Hut restaurant on January 4<sup>th</sup> 2003 in Düsseldorf, an old couple were eating Pizza with their grandson and they were enjoying every second of their lunch. Seeing a totally different generation enjoyed and spend their time to eat in the restaurant was attractive experiences for the author.

Instead of success stories, the author also experienced a failure story in serving those two different generations. One example was noticed in a fine dining Indonesian restaurant that is located in Oisterwijk, Netherlands. There was a family with two children came to the restaurant, one of the children was around six years old and the other was still a baby. The restaurant had no children menu and it only offered two types of children meal, which were children rice-table and french fries. It was obvious that the restaurant did not provide any facilities for children, such as children playground or activities for them to enjoy their time during the whole meal, because they were not their target market. During that time, the older sister got bored and started to interrupt her little brother and he started to cry. The parents tried to calm him down but it took a very long time. The employees could not do anything and it was annoying for other guests to hear the baby crying during their meal.

Those experiences led to further exploration about children and elderly as target group. It is predictable that in the future people over the age of

sixty-five in America will be the fastest growing segment in the population (Power, 1995, p.191). By the year 2010 people in Europe will be sixty-two years old or older. This fastest growing segment has more discretionary income because they do not have to pay the expenses to raise and educate their children anymore. Fifty percent of the income of pensioners across Europe still comes from state pensions and it means that they are time-rich and have a significant amount of discretionary income to spend. Moreover, elderly people will be the great customer for businesses. (Solomon et al., 1999, p.65-367).

Furthermore, some marketers try to reach children as their target market because they are brand conscious and they are not price sensitive (Solomon, 1996, p.506). According to James McNeal, the author of several books on children marketing, most children spend their money in the food industry. Food purchased from either food service or retail outlets consume the greatest proportion of children's dollars, and they even influence food purchases more than any other consumer goods (Gillera, 1993, p.1-2).

Based on the experiences of the author and the opportunity for businesses to focus on those different generations as their prospective customers, the author found out that it would be interesting to discover the possibilities in serving children and elderly people in the same restaurant.

## CHILDREN AND ELDERLY PEOPLE AS RESTAURANT CUSTOMERS

### The Characteristics of Children and Elderly People

In order to implement the food service concept to children and elderly people, it is necessary to take a look at the definition of children and elderly and their

characteristics. Edginton et al. (1995) stated that Erikson's life stages is one of the most accepted theories of personal development. There are eight life stages, which are infancy, young childhood, middle childhood, late childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood and old age. Within each stage, individuals try to adapt with others in social world and set new orientation for their self (p. 134).

The childhood period can be divided into four stages, which are infancy (from birth until the age of three), preschool children (the age of four until five years old), younger children (the age of six until eight years old) and older children (the age of nine until twelve years old). Although there are several characteristic of each stage, but it is certainly known that play and games are the major activities in their leisure time. Most of children are active and fit until the age of ten and they love high-energy activities (Edginton et al., 1995, p.134-139).

Solomon (1996, p.526) claimed that the old age period consist of four segments, which are older group (the age of fifty five until sixty four), elderly (the age of sixty five until seventy four), aged group (the age of seventy five until eighty four) and very old group (the age of eighty five and up). In addition, the characteristics of older group are the shift from work to leisure activities and they still want to stay active and feel good about themselves, socializing with family and friends and they spend many activities with their children and grandchildren (Edginton et al., 1995, p. 153). Many elderly people are engaged in a voluntary work and continue to work or involve in daily care of a grandchild. Moreover, nowadays, most of elderly people are healthy, energetic and interested in new products and services and the most important thing is they have income to purchase them (p.365 & 527-529).

### **The Expectation of Children and Elderly People toward Food Service Operations**

Generally, people cannot say what customers expect from business by business, because every business has its own type of customer and they have their own expectation toward the business (Schneider & Bowen, 1995, p.26).

Every hospitality industry including food service operations has the main aim to satisfy the guests. In order to achieve their aim, they need to find out what their guests' needs and wants and try to fulfil their expectation. Essentially, every hospitality industry has to know what type of customer they are going to serve.

Further, there are five factors that customers might look for to meet their needs and wants, which are physiological, economic, social, psychological and convenience (Lilicrap et al., 1998, p.9). The analysis of children's and elderly people's expectation in the following section will be based on those five factors.

### **The Expectation of Children as Customers**

1. Physiological factor. Children taste of food is changing as they become older, children under six years old like to eat pizza, milk, cold cereal, hamburgers or cheese burgers, macaroni and cheese, cookies, gelatine and french fries. On the other hand, children from six until seventeen years old like pizza, tacos, french fries, nachos, hamburgers or cheeseburgers. (Mill, 2001, p.37). Moreover, children preferred to have freshly prepared better than pre-cooked food. Several studies of children's food preferences in the context of school meals found that food such as chips, sausages, beans, beef burgers, fish fingers, pizza and spaghetti were children's favourites. (Noble et al., 2000, p.416).
2. Economic factor. Children want their meal to be served quickly because it will please them and also their parents. If the meal is not ready, it is suggested to ask their parents if it is possible to serve them some snacks (Solomon & Prueter, 1997, p.135-136). Solomon (1996) strongly pointed that children do not look at price and brand as long as they like the product they are going to buy it and this is one of the reasons why marketers try to focus on children as their target market (p.506).
3. Social factor. Children want to have an enjoyable time with friends and family. "Children like and prefer stores that are children friendly that are liked by their parents" (Gunter & Furnham, 1998, p.49). It is necessary to give a friendly service and try to please children and their families.
4. Psychological factor. Children have the tendency to buy a product after watching advertisement on TV, from their friends, shops and catalogues. McDonald's is one of the best examples of fast food restaurant that offers and advertise different kind of children packages. The themes of their packages are up to date with children trends, for example favourite films or cartoon, and most children buy the products. (Gunter & Furnham, 1998, p.60).
5. Convenience factor. Children are active and love to play, thus, it is important to make sure that they

are busy with some activities. “Be sure the children have a menu and crayons. This will keep them entertained”. Another example to please them is by providing children playground (Solomon & Prueter, 1997, pp.135-136).

### **The Expectation of Elderly People as Customer**

1. Physiological factor. Restaurants need to provide special food such as vegetarian and diabetic because elderly people tend to aware to their health and the nutrition of food (Solomon et al., 1999, p.365). One study undertaken by the National Restaurant Association found that elderly people tend to eat in restaurant during breakfast and lunch and they prefer to come to the restaurant on weekdays (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.321).
2. Economic factor. Fast and rapid service is not an important factor for elderly because they have more leisure time and they perceive dining in a restaurant is a social event (Fu & Parks, 2001, pp.321-322). A survey by Johnson and Johnson identified that quality of the products; attractive prices that are a good value for their money and store reputation are the important factors for older shopper (Gunter, 1998, p. 34).
3. Social factor. Elderly people are very interested in social aspects when they are dining out in a restaurant. Therefore, an enjoyable atmosphere will please them when they gather together with their friends or families (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.321).
4. Psychological factor. Elderly people have more leisure time and in order to fulfil their leisurely lifestyle, they like to go to a restaurant (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.321).
5. Convenience factor. Elderly people want to have friendly service, welcoming, pleasant and comfortable atmosphere when they come to a restaurant. Dining staffs have to learn how to perceive them, give warm and friendly atmosphere and make them feel important (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.331).

### **THE FOOD SERVICE PROCESS**

The food service in the restaurant starts when guests arrive and enter the restaurant, customers will get their first impression when the employees greet and welcome them. The next process is asking for reservation. If they have already made reservation, the employee will put their jackets in the wardrobe and escort them to their table. If no reservation has been made, the employee will try to help them to find a table.

In the dining room, the menu card will be given and the service process continues. The guests will look at the varieties and reasonable price of food and beverage, which are offered in the menu card. The guests will order some food and during that time they will consider some aspects; for example, atmosphere, such as privacy, space, decoration, music and entertainment; restaurant facilities, such as smoking and no smoking area, bathroom and parking area; and finally the service itself, which is related to friendliness, quick service, efficient, politeness, and attentiveness. The food will be served and the guests will know the quality of food.

At the end of the whole service process, if the guests are able to fulfil their needs and wants, they will be satisfied. On the other hand, if they cannot satisfy their needs and wants they will be disappointed or they might complain and will not return to the restaurant (Strianese, 1997).

*“Customers have their own expectation regarding to what they are going to experience during the service process, before they come to a restaurant. It is necessary to deliver at least good service in order not to make them disappointed”* (Ive, 2000, p.12).

### **The Food Service Concept for Children And Elderly People**

Discovering the needs and wants of children and elderly people as customers, will give a clear picture to the food service operations in providing the right products and services to them. Instead of looking at the needs and wants of both target groups, food service operations have to adjust their service concept during the service process to their customers in order to satisfy both of them.

The food service concepts that have to be customized to the types of customers involves aspect of product, personnel and service, price, place and promotion (Lillicrap et al., 1998, p.10).

### **The Food Service Concept for Children as Customer**

The food service concepts for children as target group are:

1. Product aspect. In order to give children the food they want such as hamburgers, French fries, chicken, spaghetti, hot dogs and pizza as the top five favourite food from the National Restaurant Association’s survey, it is suggested to be creative in “playing” with food. Some examples were given such as, creative pizza in animal shapes, “Mickey Mouse Pizza” a speciality of Spago in

West Hollywood, California. (Gillera, 1993, p.55).

2. Personnel aspect. Referring to a study by Consumer Reports on Eating Share Trends, 79 percent of households with children below thirteen preferred to go at quick service restaurants, for example pizza, hamburger, Mexican and ice cream restaurants (Gillera, 1993, p.8). The same result that during the service process, children want to be served quickly because the purpose they come to a restaurant is to eat nice food (Solomon & Prueter, 1997, p.135-136). In the context of personnel, it was found that employees should deliver children a friendly service in order to please them (Gunter & Furnham, 1998, p.49). The example of a casual restaurant chain owned by Carlson Company, T.G.I Friday's, they create a welcoming environment where children feel wanted or make them feel important. They create a kid-friendly environment, serve children first and treat them with respect (Gillera, 1993, p.18).
3. Price aspect. It is recommended that to price items on children's menu it is necessary to price it low because they are in the level of value-conscious age. A minimal charge for children's meal will lead to tremendous benefits in the future. Although less profit will be obtained but hopefully, more customers will come to the business (Gillera, 1993, p.52).
4. Place aspect. Children would like to eat in a restaurant that are interesting for them and provide entertainment (Mill, 2001, p.45). McDonalds is one example of good fast food restaurants which take into account place aspect, because instead of providing children favourite menu with toys and the colour of the building are attracted licensed character cups, they provide play ground for their children customers. In addition, the exterior model and the colour of the building are also designed attractively for children (Underhill, 2000, p.145).
5. Promotion aspect. One of the useful ways to communicate a product is through television because children learn a great deal of consumer behaviour including brands, types of stores and pricing mostly from TV advertising instead of catalogues, shops and friends. (Gunter & Furnham, 1998, p.36 & 60). Children play an important role in family decision-making, and the example of McDonald's encouraged family trips to the restaurants (Solomon, 1996, p.508). Menu is one of the important promotion tools that has to be taken into consideration. Therefore, it is suggested that restaurant menu has to entertain,

amuse and stimulate children imaginative minds while keeping them busy until their food arrives, for example by using stories, games, puzzle and fold outs in the menu card. Moreover, in designing a menu it has to be remembered to make it simple and has a low cost so it can be given away (Gillera, 1993, p.60).

### **The Food Service Concept for Elderly as Customer**

The food service concepts for elderly people as target group are:

1. Product aspect. Elderly people tend to be aware with their health and the nutrition of food (Solomon et al., 1999, p. 365). They tend to eat in restaurant during breakfast and lunch and prefer to come to the restaurant on weekdays (CREST, 1988 cited in Fu & Parks, 2001, p.321). It is necessary for food service operation to pay attention in the availability for special food, for example vegetarian and diabetic, and special guests' requests have to be fulfilled. All you can eat buffets and "comfort food" such as roast chicken and meatloaf will attract elderly people to eat in a restaurant (Mill, 2001, p.35-41).
2. Personnel aspect. Elderly people would like to have a friendly service during their meal (Mill, 2001: 35). A research in the United States found that friendliness of the service and the feelings that they are valued customers by giving individual attention, rather than speed and accuracy of service, were two important factors to satisfy elderly people. Warm and friendly environment will make elderly people feel as they are eating at home. It is necessary for dining staff members to understand elderly people to provide the right service to them (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.322 & 331).
3. Price aspect. Data shows that the economic health of elderly consumers becomes better; they are finished with many financial obligations, so they can spend more money for themselves (Solomon, 1996, p.523). Previous research on purchasing behaviour found that elderly people tend to be a loyal shopper and they are lack sense of adventure, so they buy the same product and have a tendency to be a loyal shopper (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.321). It can be concluded that price is not important for elderly people as long as they get the same product with the same quality.
4. Place aspect. Two reasons why elderly people dine out in a restaurant are convenient and companionship. It is not economical for them to cook just for one or two people at home, it is

better for them to dine out. Mostly they go out to a restaurant to have a social contact with others. It is necessary for food service industry to provide enjoyable gathering place for them so they can enjoy their time eating with their families or friends, and provides welcoming, pleasant and comfortable atmosphere (Fu & Parks, 2001, p.321-322).

5. Promotion aspect. TV advertising is the best way to communicate a product for elderly people because most of the time they rely on TV as the window to society. Radio and news magazine are other ways to advertise because they tend to listen to radio news at all times of the day and read news magazine. It is important to pay attention to some factors when designing an advertisement for elderly people which are use simple language, use clear and bright pictures, use action to attract attention, speak clearly and keep the word count low, use a single sales message, which means do not use too much pictures and graphics (Solomon, 1996, p.527-528).

## CONCLUSION

It is a challenge for food service operations to have children and elderly people as their customers. However, the most important thing that has to be remembered is know the customers first by determining their needs and wants because they are the focus of the business. Then create the mix of products and services that will satisfy those needs and wants and finally promote and sell the product-service mix to generate satisfactory income.

*"If you satisfy the customers but fail to get the profit, you will soon be out of business; if you get the profit but fail to satisfy the customers, you will soon be out of customers"* (Mill, 2001, p.50-52).

Generally, it is possible to serve children and elderly people in the same restaurant as long as they provide the right products and services for them. The types of food and beverage operations that are possible to serve both customers are full menu restaurants or lunchrooms that provide indoor or outdoor service with a wide variety of menu items or fast food restaurants that have limited choice of menu and the guests have to order in the counter and find their table by themselves.

In order to serve children and elderly people, food service operations have to consider five aspects, which are:

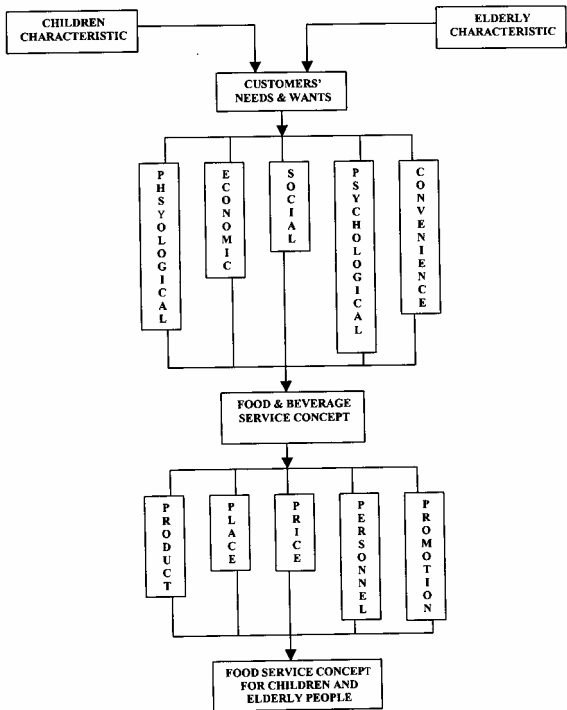
1. Product, although children and elderly have totally different product preferences, food service operations have to provide several choices for

both customers. Instead of providing hamburgers and french fries, McDonald's as the leader of fast food restaurant, offer several choices of food and beverage, which are healthier such as McSalad, coffee and tea that elderly people would like to eat and drink. Pizza Hut also offers salad bar, different kind of soups and vegetarian pizza.

2. Personnel, children and elderly people love to eat in a restaurant that has a friendly service. They prefer individual attention by the dining staff member to make them feel important. On the other hand, children want to be served quickly but elderly want to enjoy their time eating in a restaurant. It is necessary to serve children quickly and during the time keep them busy with some activities. It is a compulsory to have children menu because "Interactive menus which involve children will keep them quiet while waiting for their food" (Gilleran, 1993, p.50).
3. Price, children will not consider about the price as long as they like the product and its taste, they are not price sensitive (Solomon, 1996, p.506). They will never go out to a restaurant by themselves because they always eat in a restaurant with their family. It is necessary to have a reasonable price because a minimal charge for children's meal will lead to tremendous benefits for the future. Although less profit will be obtained but more customers will come to the business (Gilleran, 1993, p.52). Special package and special offer will interest both customers; one example for elderly menu is small portion with a lower price.
4. Place, a pleasant, comfortable and welcoming atmosphere will be suggested to food service operations who want to serve both customers. It is important to provide enough space because children are very active and elderly need more space. It is recommended to provide facilities for both customers, such as indoor playground and entertainment.
5. Promotion, menu is one of the marketing tools that should be paid more attention. An interesting and creative children menu should be created in order to be success in the future. "The integral part in the service concept is children menu because interesting menu makes them feel welcome" (Gilleran, 1993, p.49). Menu for elderly people should use simple language and use clear and bright letters. It is suggested to use television to advertise food service industry because both children and elderly people have more time to watch television. Children frequently talk about advertisement on TV with their friends (Gunter & Furnham, 1998, p.29). The example of

McDonald's in advertising new children menu (Happy Meal) on television is very helpful in attracting and influencing children to buy their new packages.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL



It is a challenge for food service operations in serving children and elderly people in the same restaurants because they are a prosperous target market that can lead to tremendous benefit in the future.

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