



# At your serve-less

Service standards that please Westerners may not appeal to Chinese consumers

BY ALEXANDRA LAGES

**H**ow attentive should a shop assistant or a restaurant waiter be? How does their attentiveness influence the satisfaction of customers? The conventional marketing wisdom is that attentive service increases business, but the results of Australian research indicate that it all depends on culture.

The research found that going that extra mile to provide top-notch service could lead to dissatisfaction, complaints and consumers taking their custom elsewhere.

Researcher Keh Hean Tat, professor of marketing at the University of Queensland, says what pleases a Chinese customer may not have the same effect on other customers. "The baseline is we should treat our customers well but we shouldn't go beyond a certain point," he says. Where that point is depends on the customer's cultural background.

Mr Keh presented the preliminary results of his latest research during a marketing seminar at the University of Macau in November. His work on the responses of consumers from different cultures to highly attentive service shows that consumers from more individualistic Western cultures favour

aspects of service different from those favoured by consumers from more collectivist cultures such as Macau's or the mainland's.

Mr Keh's research focused on Canadian and Chinese consumers in shops and restaurants. He didn't disclose if the research focused on shoppers in luxury outlets or cheaper, bargain shopping.

"We have to have good service. Consumers everywhere, regardless [of whether] they are in China or elsewhere, would like to have high-quality service," Mr Keh told Macau Business.

But the definition of good service varies, he says.

## Say cheese

Most important among Chinese consumers is whether they feel the employee rendering the service is genuine and sincere. They are less satisfied if they suspect that the employee is trying to foist merchandise on them or angling for a tip.

"If the consumers perceive the employee to be genuine and sincere in wanting to help the customer, then the outcome should still be positive," Mr Keh says.

Mr Keh's research also looked into how Canadian and Chinese customers react to a shop assistant's smile.

Chinese consumers are most likely to buy if they perceive the smile to be genuine, while Canadians are most likely to buy if they perceive the smile as professional.

"Chinese buyers value authenticity but Canadians value professionalism," Mr Keh says.

He says service staff in Chinese markets should be trained to be more genuine. In Western markets such as Canada, service staff should be trained to be more professional.

Service quality is a hot topic in Macau, where shops, restaurants and hotels are often criticised for their poor standards.

"To be fair, service quality is an issue that is of concern not only to Macau but to many other countries," says Mr Keh.

"Obviously, as the standard of living improves, the expectations of consumers will also increase. In a more competitive marketplace, service organisations, in order to continue to do well, have to make sure they can keep up with the consumer's expectations." ■



# Should we live to 1,000?

IF OUR PLANET HAS A FINITE CAPACITY TO SUPPORT HUMAN LIFE, IS IT BETTER TO HAVE FEWER PEOPLE LIVING LONGER LIVES, OR MORE PEOPLE LIVING SHORTER LIVES?

**O**n which problems should we focus research in medicine and the biological sciences? There is a strong argument for tackling the diseases that kill the most people – diseases like malaria, measles and diarrhoea, which kill millions in developing countries but very few in the developed world.

Developed countries, however, devote most of their research funds to the diseases from which their citizens suffer, and that seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Given that constraint, which medical breakthrough would do the most to improve our lives?

If your first thought is “a cure for cancer” or “a cure for heart disease”, think again. Aubrey de Grey, chief science officer of SENS Foundation and the world’s most prominent advocate of anti-aging research, argues that it makes no sense to spend the vast majority of our medical resources on trying to combat the diseases of aging without tackling aging itself. If we cure one of these diseases, those who would have died from it can expect to succumb to another in a few years. The benefit is therefore modest.

In developed countries, aging is the ultimate cause of 90 percent of all human deaths; thus, treating aging is a form of preventive medicine for all of the diseases of old age. Moreover, even before aging leads to our death, it reduces our capacity to enjoy our own lives and to contribute positively to the lives of others. So, instead of targeting specific diseases that are much more likely to occur when people have reached a certain age, wouldn’t a better strategy be to attempt to forestall or repair the damage done to our bodies by the aging process?

Mr de Grey believes that even modest progress in this area over the coming decade could lead to a dramatic extension of the human lifespan. All we need to do is reach what he calls “longevity escape velocity” – that is, the point at which we can extend life sufficiently to allow time for further scientific progress to permit additional extensions and thus further progress and greater longevity. Speaking recently at Princeton University, Mr de Grey said: “We don’t know how old the first person who will live to 150 is today, but the first person to live to 1,000 is almost certainly less than 20 years younger.”

## Slowing down ageing

What most attracts Mr de Grey about this prospect is not living forever but rather the extension of healthy, youthful life that would come with a degree of control over the process of aging. In developed countries, enabling those who are young or middle-aged to remain youthful longer would attenuate the looming demographic problem of an historically unprecedented proportion of the population reaching advanced age – and often becoming dependent on younger people.

On the other hand, we still need to pose the ethical question: Are we being selfish in seeking to extend our lives so

dramatically? And, if we succeed, will the outcome be good for some but unfair to others?

People in rich countries already can expect to live about 30 years longer than people in the poorest countries. If we discover how to slow aging, we might have a world in which the poor majority must face death at a time when members of the rich minority are only one-tenth of the way through their expected lifespans.

That disparity is one reason to believe that overcoming aging will increase the stock of injustice in the world. Another is that if people continue to be born, while others do not die, the planet’s population will increase at an even faster rate than it is now, which will likewise make life for some much worse than it would have been otherwise.

Whether we can overcome these objections depends on our degree of optimism about future technological and economic advances. Mr de Grey’s response to the first objection is that, while anti-aging treatment may be expensive initially, the price is likely to drop, as it has for so many other innovations, from computers to the drugs that prevent the development of AIDS. If the world can continue to develop economically and technologically, people will become wealthier and, in the long run, anti-aging treatment will benefit everyone. So why not get started and make it a priority now?

## Better off?

As for the second objection, contrary to what most people assume, success in overcoming aging could itself give us breathing space to find solutions to the population problem, because it would also delay or eliminate menopause, enabling women to have their first children much later than they can now. If economic development continues, fertility rates in developing countries will fall, as they have in developed countries. In the end, technology, too, may help to overcome the population objection, by providing new sources of energy that do not increase our carbon footprint.

The population objection raises a deeper philosophical question. If our planet has a finite capacity to support human life, is it better to have fewer people living longer lives, or more people living shorter lives? One reason for thinking it is better to have fewer people living longer lives is that only those who are born know what death deprives them of; those who do not exist cannot know what they are missing.

Mr de Grey has set up SENS Foundation to promote research into anti-aging. By most standards, his fundraising efforts have been successful, for the foundation now has an annual budget of around US\$4 million (MOP32 million). But that is still pitifully small by the standards of medical research foundations. Mr de Grey might be mistaken, but if there is only a small chance that he is right, the huge pay-offs make anti-aging research a better bet than areas of medical research that are currently far better funded.





# Funny money

Ignore the power of cartoons to boost sales at your businesses' peril, a researcher says

BY ALEXANDRA LAGES

**M**arketers argue that consumers mature with age, and so should marketing campaigns – except in Asia, and particularly Macau, where the love of cartoon characters transcends age and social barriers. Here, animated characters are used to sell credit cards, jewellery and other goods for wealthy adults.

University of Macau assistant professor of marketing Candy Fong Pun San has researched the interest adults from Greater China have for cartoon characters from the United States, Hong Kong and Japan. She argues that an adult's attachment to animation is not a sign of immaturity but of their perception of self – an idea psychologists call self-concept.

Ms Fong's research is still at an early stage but she says companies can make use of these links to increase business. Cartoon characters can be associated with products and appeal to emotions. Adult consumers may be willing

to pay more for products associated with their favourite cartoon characters, she says.

It is also in the interest of the holders of the copyrights to cartoon characters to nurture associations through licensing. This allows copyright holders to increase the amount they receive in royalties.

Molly, 43, started collecting merchandise from the My Melody franchise, a Japanese cartoon character, because her family could not afford toys when she was growing up. Ms Fong's preliminary research report, entitled "I am a Hello Kitty: The incorporation of a cartoon character into self-concept", quotes Molly as saying: "I told myself that when I had the money, I would buy as many as possible". The researcher interprets Molly's My Melody collection as an expression of her autonomy and confidence.

Michael, 21, is a fan of Winnie the Pooh. Ms Fong's research says Michael's

mother gave him a Winnie the Pooh pillow when he was little and that, for Michael, Disney's version of A.A. Milne's teddy bear is as much an escape from reality now as it was then.

## Of mice and women

Becky's favourite is Mickey Mouse, a cartoon character that has helped to shape her personality, Ms Fong's report says. "For my parents, Mickey is very positive and energetic. As a young girl, I was very timid and did not dare to speak out. I did not dare to tell my parents that I was being bullied at kindergarten. My parents thought I should be more cheerful and gave me lots of Mickey products," the report quotes Becky as saying.

For her research, Ms Fong interviewed 20 adults from Macau, Hong Kong and the mainland with fixations on cartoon characters. She found that emotional attachments with cartoon characters, usually developed during childhood, affect self-concept by working as transitional objects, role models, symbols of autonomy and competence, and as facilitators of relationships and public identity.

For many adults, "those implications tend to continue into adulthood," Ms Fong tells Macau Business.

"People have a misperception about the linkage association between consumption of cartoon character-themed





products and immaturity, but they do not understand the implications of it to self-concept development, and those self-concept implications are not going to cease over time. If you ask [adult consumers] to stop, you are depriving them of some advantages they can take from that consumption," she says.

**Money in the Kitty**

Ms Fong says social pressure may stop some adults from consuming cartoon merchandise for themselves, so they begin buying it for their children instead. She says businesses can also make money out of this trend.

"In this case, companies can try to

facilitate this kind of extension by encouraging parents to buy products for their kids, saying it's something they can consume together," she says.

Hello Kitty is a good example of a cartoon character that successfully appeals to the emotions. "It's very successful because it not only appeals to children. It has developed different types of products for different markets. They successfully made people think that Hello Kitty is not only for the kids, but also for adults," Ms Fong argues.

The scholar says fixation on cartoon characters is most common in Asia. In Western countries, most people outgrow childhood cartoon characters and

plush toys during adolescence. Adults there tend to replace them with expensive goods, pets or pastimes, which play similar roles to cartoon characters in the adulthood of Asians.

Asian adults are especially influenced by Japanese cartoons, according to Ms Fong. "Japanese are very good in developing a lot of products with cartoon-character associations."

Adult consumption of such merchandise is also more socially acceptable, she says. Ms Fong notes U.S. cartoons do not generate as much merchandise and do not easily sustain emotional attachments to the franchise as time goes by.

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