

Factors that affect the Outcome of Outside Catering in Kenya

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Abstract

Outside catering involves preparing and serving food at a location away from the business. The outcome of outside catering is important to caterers both as a marketing tool and in enhancing customer satisfaction. There are many factors that determine the outcome of outside catering which this study aimed to establish. The objective of this study was to examine the contribution of human, physical and natural factors on the outcome of outside catering as well as to identify the indicators that can be used to measure the outcome of outside catering. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The target population was 150 caterers in Nairobi in Kenya. The sample size comprised 120 outside caterers. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify the respondents. Questionnaires were used to collect data. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and presented in the form of frequency tables, percentages and graphs. The results showed that human, physical and natural factors all determine the outcome of outside catering. The findings may benefit outside caterers in understanding and hence being careful on factors that affect the outcome of outside catering. In addition caterers may use the indicators that measure outcome of outside catering to improve or know the status of their work.

Keywords: Human factors, Natural factors, Outcome, Outside catering, Physical factors

1. Introduction

Outside catering also known as off-premises catering is the art of providing food and drink away from catering premises to consumers rather than the consumer coming to the catering premises. In outside catering the caterer has no banquet hall, all serving is done in a variety of locations and the menus have to be extremely flexible to fit the wide variety of facilities at different locations (Bafna 2010). Jones (2002) note that outside catering is a specialized sector of the food service industry and is probably one of the most difficult to operate successfully and also one of the most speculative.

The fine art of catering dates back in China in the 4th millennium BC. Thereafter during the time of prosperity in Egypt (2050 -1450 BC), the culture of eating and drinking became very important. In the 20th century technical innovation, improvement of transport routes, increase in population and an extraordinary rise in travelling gave gastronomy a quick lift which made catering an important factor for transport and national economy. In the 21st century the demand for catered services increased. The need to change the trend where catered services were available at a certain location changed to the catered services being brought to the customer hence caterers adopted to this change and began preparing and serving food and drink at customers work place, home and to self service parties. These changes were mainly due to large number of family members employed, limited facilities and space in households and apartments, need to get professional help so that customers have a good time with guests and at the same time have good food graciously and professionally served. With this came numerous challenges where outside caterers were required to offer products and services of high quality. Quality is difficult to define in relation to hospitality operations but easy to recognise since it is a perception of how good or bad a product is based upon an individual's point of view (Scanlon, 2007) refer to quality as the ability of a product to consistently meet or exceed customer's expectations. Also the quality has to be managed as it just do not happen thus quality in outside catering has to be embraced in order for customer satisfaction to be achieved.

Successful catering in today's market is a combination of many important components which affect the outcome of the service (Bafna, 2010). Just to mention poor quality, complaints and dissatisfied customers can destroy the image of caterers and consequently cause losses that can result in closure of the business, lawsuits etc. Regardless

of the customer's choice of location the caterer is expected to give flawless service irrespective of other numerous technical and aesthetic challenges.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What human factors affect the outcome of outside catering?
2. What physical factors determine the outcome of outside catering?
3. What natural factors determine the outcome of outside catering?
4. What indicators are used to measure the outcome of outside catering?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Outside Catering

Outside catering is the most speculative food service industry. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to estimate the size and turnover of this sector since by the vary nature of things outside catering is not a permanent operation. The kind of events vary from garden parties for just a few people, up to a few thousand at royal garden parties, fund raising events, exhibitions either on permanent sites or temporary events; agricultural shows, sports events of all kinds; private functions such as wedding receptions, anniversary parties and other social occasions (Jones, 2002).

In this sector of outside catering, no licence is required to operate as an outside caterer, there are no premises except possibly a base store and kitchen and there are many small operators who may not be registered. Outside catering may be broadly divided into two main types of functions such as contracted and speculative functions. In contracted functions, the operators agree to cater for a specified and guaranteed number of customers. In this respect it is very similar to banqueting, except that instead of providing food and refreshment in a suite, the setting is likely to be a semi-permanent chalet (Jones, 2002). However, catering seems pretty straightforward and simple; you cook food and serve it, right. That is the basic idea, but there is more to it. A whole lot more. Catering involves a lot of planning and preparation, teamwork, creativity and some pretty good equipment. Food is definitely the star in the catering world, but it is one part of the equation. As catering companies have moved towards the full service event planning model, the focus has morphed. It's not that food is no longer a focal point, but rather a broader mission. Catering is about satisfying all the senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste.

Sethi (2008) alludes that texture of food can be determined both by perception and mouth feel. It varies from food to food and in the same food too when different methods of cooking were used. Texture also depends on structural composition of food which can be described as rough, smooth, grainy, coarse, fine, crisp, viscous, spongy and heavy. People accept or reject foods which do not agree with their own mental images regarding shape, size, viscosity or sheen. For example, rice which is overcooked and therefore sticky instead of grainy will not be accepted if customers have a choice.

Sethi (2008) points out that the right atmosphere, can appeal to all senses that make an event special and memorable. Of course beautifully prepared food can appeal to one's sense of taste, smell and sight perhaps even touch, but it should not outshine the rest of the event. Caterers today generally in every piece of the puzzle from the decor to the glassware to have the same kind of impact. From staffing, their skills, quality of their services, hygiene, flatware to the flowers, lighting to linens, tables to tunes everything should compliment the food to create a unified overall experience as continuity is key.

Normann (2000) explains the concept of outcome as based on the output, quality of the process, production, delivery system and a general philosophy pervading a whole organisation. Control on the product implies that low quality and defects occur thus meaning control easily becomes a specialised function differentiated technically and socially from the rest of the organisation. Excellence apply not only to the product but also to the price, security, planning strategy management, human relations and the whole system of product delivery.

2.2 Human factors and outside catering

Kotscheven and Terrel (1977) state that service occurs during the span of time between completion of production and presentation of the food to the customer. Its quality is likely to be at its most fragile point of excellence. The effective functioning of the service depend on planning, selection of equipment to meet specific needs and a good flow of travel from customer order to service of food.

Lillicrap et al., (2002) on the aspect of service providers and their staff invest on points that in today's service a competent and dedicated workforce is a key course as people continue to play different but nevertheless pivotal roles. They are essential in analysing and interpreting data from the market, create capacities required to design and refine product offerings and service delivery systems. Their discretionary capacities construct the 'fit' between

products and customers needs, and are the 'face' of the service organisation at 'the moment of truth'.

Well managed service companies do not fear to give their personal freedom to handle customer situations in a flexible way. However freedom of action must be backed up by competence, tools and understanding. In addition some fundamentals must be included such as training on technical skills needed and interactive skills, follow up and reinforcement where backlash is avoided by regularly measuring in intervals on the behavioural effect on people who have undergone training in order to know what kind of reinforcement to be applied such as reird systems favouring the desired patterns and finally job design and role design where there may be need to change recruitment strategies. Monitoring jobs and roles and acting upon those which need to be redesigned to more interesting and enriching to employees (Bernard and Stone, 1991).

Splaver (1991) points out that employees make the difference between success and failure. Therefore, it is important for caterers to remember that it is not what they do but what their staff do well that determines the success of the event. For this, it is essential to find suitable employees and place them with appropriate jobs. To this end, a caterer must set out the job description clearly and job requirements to perform the duties described. This analysis should include the skills, knowledge, character traits and physical abilities needed to do the job.

Ursla and Shirley (1998) outline that every establishment that serves the public needs to have a customer policy. This take the form of a series of specific and achievable statements to ensure that customer standards are implemented by the entire work force. The prime concern must always be to ensure that customers feel welcomed and that they were served in clean, pleasant and safe surroundings with the best possible quality and type of product. Lillicrap et al., (2002) posit that majority of staff employed at outdoor catering functions are either taken on as casual staff which may involve a lot of administration for the organisers and the scrutiny of staff must be very thorough to ensure the quality of personnel. The organisation of outdoor catering functions must be thorough as, once on site, it is often virtually impossible to rectify errors. Any items forgotten, or not packed on the transport, have to be gone without which is detrimental of the function, and could well result in the loss of 'repeat' business at a later date. Customers expect more than the taking of orders and delivery and anticipation of their guests need from the service providers. The key is for the server to be alert to guest needs and potential problems. Suggestive selling in that food operation should be customer driven.

2.3 Physical factors in outside catering

Normann (2000) outlines that although services may be intangible and best described as an act, equipment can also play an important role in its production as it does in manufacturing of products. Service providers must always be alert to technologies which although might not traditionally be a part of the competitive sphere but might have a transforming effect on the business. To mean that technology and physics equipment can be used to substitute for manpower with a view to reduce costs and or increase efficiency. Scanlon (2007) points out the factors that affect selection of equipment to include performance and functionality of design, maintenance, reliability of equipment, availability and cost of replacements, employee skill level to the production needs of the menu, current and future equipment requirements based on customer needs and demands. The application and development of new technology, government regulations, competitors adaptation of technology to reduce labour and utility costs and innovations in product design, aesthetic components and or construction features all influence the selection of equipment for a food production system. Both basic large and small equipment require caterers to research their capabilities and fit them into the food production system.

Cesarani, Kinton and Foskett (2002) define equipment as the backbone and key to catering success and quality. In terms of food safety it controls the most critical step in the food production process. Kitchen equipment are expensive hence initial selection is important. The caterer, staff, equipment, and operation are literally moved to a foreign location. This location may or may not be ideal for catered functions. Creative people who love continual change, are good problem solvers, and thrive on organization partake in the challenge of this ever-changing medium. Bafna (2010) note that catering firms have learned that mise en place and the use of intuition are the main factors that allow continual success in Outside Catering. Preparing mise en place is something that caterers cannot stress enough to service staff. Having an actual list of items to take to a function along with exact diagrams of workstations is crucial. Creating a beautiful dining room in a foreign setting takes many items and many more are often overlooked or not considered. Once caterers leave their establishment with equipment, it is not feasible or acceptable to run back for forgotten items. All things must be taken into consideration as well as all potential problems. It is important to have extra china, flatware, stemware, and utensils in case of break- age. Linen may fall on the ground into the dirt during setup; and can't grab another from the linen closet. Unlike in a restaurant or catering facility, someone else can- not clean or cover up mistakes. For example, ice tends to melt much faster outside, even when in a cooler, so having extra is necessary. If a food station is not properly set up and equipped, problems may arise since there are no quick fixes out in the field. All required and a few extra serving utensils,

cocktail trays, and bar equipment are needed. Creating detailed lists for each area of setup eases stress for service staff. Lists need to be checked and rechecked so that the details of mise en place are not just mental checklists, but actual written, preferably typed lists of equipment and diagrams of stations and movement as applicable. Checking and rechecking, while in the back thinking about the worst-case scenario, is necessary.

2.4 Natural Factors in outside catering

Scanlon (2007) states that food hygiene as the act concerned with the study of the causes and prevention of illness associated with eating contaminated food. Food handlers may find it easy to keep food visibly clean but food which looks, smells and even tastes good may still be poisonous. This hidden danger makes hygiene important for catering establishments. Scanlon (2007) further points out that the condition of the premises especially cleanliness and infestation levels, equipment should be separated for example that for raw foods and that for cooked food, the standard of personal hygiene for food handlers which range from clothing such as covered hair, practices such as decontaminating ones hands before handling food, covering cuts and boils, keeping nails clean and short, not wearing jewellery while handling food, doing away with habits such as smoking, tasting food using fingers or other activities that bring hands and mouth directly in contact with food and not handling food while ill with sickness, diarrhoea, sore throat, fever and skin infection.

Bafna (2010) posits that using intuition about the area where the catering will take place is half of the battle. Equipment in premise catering is easily accessible, since service stations and a pantry have already been designed for ease and comfort of service. For this reason, researching the site and intuitively thinking of the function's surroundings are the foundations of outside catering. Many conveniences are taken for granted when performing a function on premises. Simple elements such as running water and electricity may not be accessible to the service staff when off-site. The first step in attaining the knowledge necessary for outside catering is establishing route of arrival for the service staff. Creating and distributing a detailed list of directions for all service personnel with phone numbers and arrival times is essential. Second, familiarizing staff with the facility prior to the function is crucial. For example, when a function is inside a private home, it is important to find out what is accessible. Bafna (2010) continued to note that although there may be a perfect spot to place a service area, the host may not want you to use that particular area yet you are expected to service guests in the best and most efficient manner; however, it is important to realize that the caterer is also a guest in the host's home. Caterers are expected to respect the wishes and desires of the host while trying to provide the most professional service in a foreign setting. This is probably the most frustrating aspect of catering in the private sector. Events that take place in more obscure areas need to be approached with an open mind and creative eyes. Often these locations can lead to service nightmares. Areas such wooded areas, lawns and the almighty tent in the middle of nowhere can be deceiving. There may be muddy and unstable areas that can make table setting difficult. Creating workstations or side stations may be challenging due to uneven surfaces. They must be placed and created in areas that will logically work and not detract from the décor of the affair. Accurately measured floor plans and diagrams help service staff be successful. In retrospect, using intuition is key in creating that restaurant feeling out in the field of outside catering.

3. Materials and Methods

The study is carried out in Nairobi, Kenya. The target population comprised 150 outside caterers. However 120 caterers participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the study area while snowball sampling was used to identify the respondents for the study. Questionnaires were used in the collection of data. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data that was represented in the form of bar graphs, percentages and frequency distribution tables.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Personal Information

Majority (69%) of the respondents were female which may be explained by the nature of outside catering which could be associated more with the nature of female interest in cooking. Another majority (68%) had attained education up to diploma level in either a related field or catering, 20% were graduates in various disciplines while 12% were secondary level. With regard to age bracket of respondents, 42% were between the age of 31-40 years, 29% ranged between 41-50 years, while another 29% ranged between 20-30 years. Experience in catering was evident from the fact that 44% of the respondents had experience of 6-10 years, 18% had experience for over 10 years while 38% of the caterers had experience of less than 5 years.

4.2 Human Factors and Outside Catering

4.2.1 Service providers

From the findings an almost equal percentage of 36% and 35% agreed and disagreed respectively that misunderstanding between employees in terms of misinterpretation of information, miscommunication and not being in agreement on issues pertaining to outside catering affect the outcome. The results could indicate that there is rare misunderstanding hence communication between service providers and customers was clear. Setting undercharging and poor planning were both indicated by 50% of the respondents as having an effect on the outcome of outside catering. Despite the fact that undercharging could be a marketing strategy, it resulted in purchase of poor quality and inadequate ingredients used for food preparation and implementation of other cost cutting measures such as hiring few equipment, few staff and paying low amounts to staff that eventually affects their productivity and eventual profitability. On the other hand, poor planning affects the flow of work due to many gaps. However, a good number may have disagreed on lack of planning owing to the fact that they may not be involved in it or their perception of planning could be different. Having few staff in an event was agreed by 38% of the respondents as affecting the outcome of outside catering while this was disagreed by 41%. For those who agreed their reasons were mainly attributed to inability to serve well and also fatigue on the part of the staff who feel overloaded with work. However those who felt that few staff do not affect the outcome of catering was mainly because payments made to them were higher unlike when there are more staff. Their reason was however biased towards themselves and not on the part of the caterer who is passionate about the outcome of the event. Finally, use of untrained staff and wild orders were agreed by an equal percentage of 21% as affecting the outcome of outside catering while a majority of 61% and 59% disagreed respectively which could mean that trained staff were employed and the orders being accepted were within their abilities. Summary of the results are presented in figure 1.

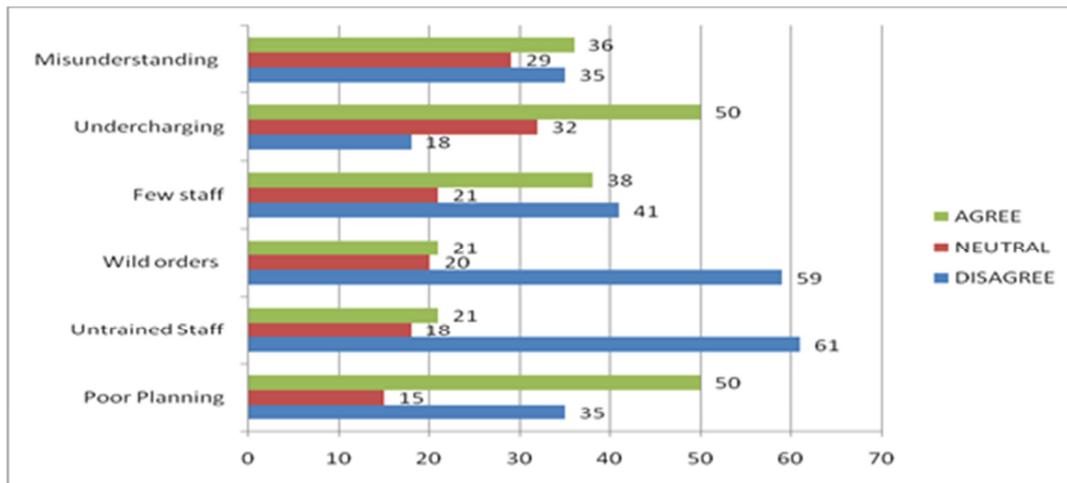


Figure 1: Service Providers factors on outcome of outside catering

4.2.2 Customer Factors

Majority (85%) of caterers agreed that underestimating the number of guests affects the outcome of outside catering. When a customer gives the number of guests, caterers use the number to plan for issues such as number of serving points, personnel, quantity of food items to be purchased and even the number of equipment needed. Therefore, when the number of guests increase, plates and other service items become inadequate, chances of food running out increase or caterers are forced by the event organizers to reduce portion of food being served in order to fit the crowd. This decrease in the portion of food served results in consumers not being satisfied and at times can make other consumers join another serving point to get more food which means use of more plates unnecessarily. Difficulty in customers making payments to caterers was rated by 75% as a factor that affects outcome of outside catering. When customers make payments as agreed without delay and complaining, caterers get motivated to go out of their way to ensure they don't disappoint them. From the findings (71%) agreed that customers demanding services they did not agree on affect outside catering. For example, when customers demand for silver service during the function whereas they had agreed on buffet service. Another majority of 62% also agreed that when customers want services at low prices, it affects outside catering as the caterer results to buying cheap ingredients and also cost cutting measures such as engaging few staff and giving them low wages which affects their morale and subsequent productivity. Notable is the fact that when customers pay low prices, caterers adjust both services, products and morale to match accordingly. Customers represented by 47% agreed that outside catering is negatively affected when customers take control of all the operations and decisions which

would otherwise have been the caterers thus resulting in caterers feeling that they do not have their space to work independently. An equal percentage of 47% agreed that elaborate menus and over crowding by customers at serving points affected the outcome of outside catering. An elaborate menu requires more personnel and equipment both in the kitchen and service and also delays movement in service queues due to the variety of foods which ends in slow service and fatigue of customers hence affects the outcome of outside catering negatively. When the crowd is large it is advisable for caterers to ensure a lean menu that is manageable. Summary of the findings are presented in figure 2.

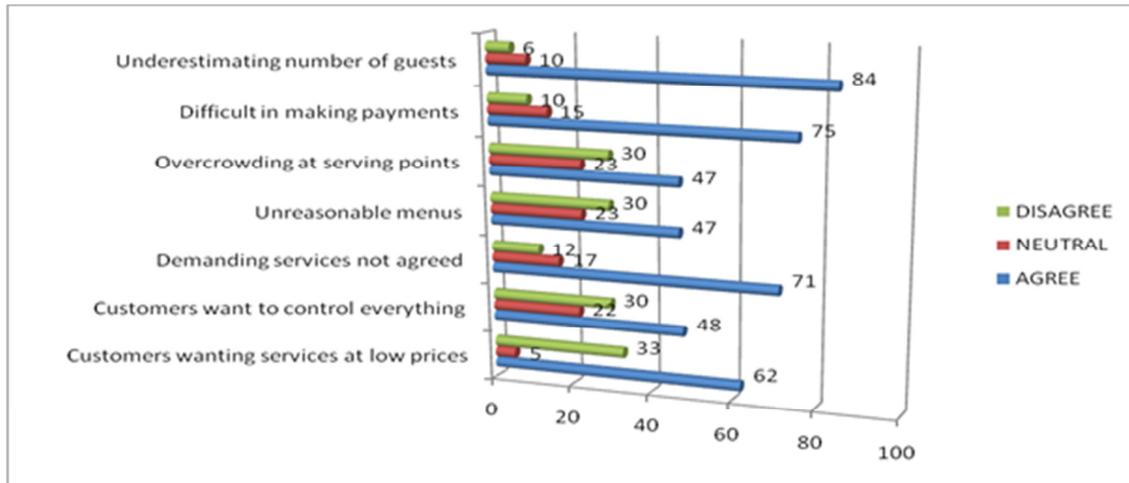


Figure 2: Customer factors that affect outcome of outside catering

4.2.3 Physical Factors

Of the physical factors used in catering, it was agreed by 80% of the respondents that inadequate service equipment and inadequate ingredients by 74% as affecting the outcome of outside catering. 66% agreed that poor source of energy affected outside catering. Inadequate service equipment slows the execution of services and creates long queues. Depending on the equipment, for example, inadequate serving spoons results in sharing with more than one food item high slows the service and can cause cross-contamination of foods. To add on that, lack of plates and cutlery can stall queues which affect the smooth flow of service. Poor source of energy can affect food preparation and its outcome. For example, use of wet firewood emits a lot of smoke which causes discomfort to cooks and can reduce their concentration and hence productivity. Wet firewood also emits little heat which could be inadequate in cooking the food thus adversely affects the preparation process. Inadequate ingredients affect the quality of food e.g. few tomatoes can affect the taste and texture of food and vice versa. Again, based on the findings, 53% of the respondents indicated that inadequate cooking equipment affects the outcome of outside catering. For example, when cooking pans are few, finishing on time becomes difficult. Finally, respondents disagreed that low quality ingredients affect the outcome of outside catering. For example, low grade rice can be used but if cooking is well done it camouflages the quality. Notable is the fact that the outcome of food was dependent on the expertise of the cook and not the ingredients hence good grade of rice if cooked badly will give poor results. Summary of results are as presented in figure 3.

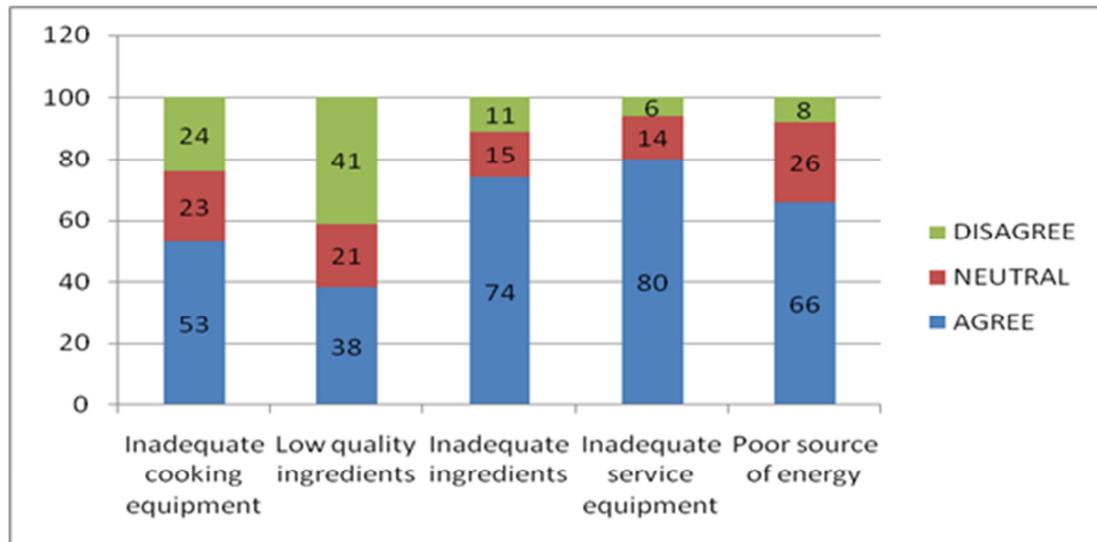


Figure 3: Physical factors that affect outcome of outside catering

4.2.4 Natural Factors

Majority (90%) and (80%) of the respondents agreed that rainy and windy weather respectively, affected the outcome of outside catering. In the case of rain, it disrupts movement and transportation of food from point A to B. It also slow employees and creates a dull mood on both customers and employees. Rainy weather affects queues as customers tend to crowd around food points especially for functions held in open grounds. Rainy weather also cools food faster which affects the taste and temperature. On the other hand, windy weather was found to blow flames of chaffing dishes that easily cause fire. Again many service items such as napkins, drinking straws and servittes are blown away easily. Other environmental factors that affect outcome of outside catering were dusty environment in which 54% customers felt affected. Dust mainly dirtifies plates, cutlery and table cloths. However, when it is dusty and not windy, the effects of dust are negligible. Hot weather was found not to affect the outcome of outside catering. The effects seem not to disrupt any operations. The state of the grounds affect the outcome of outside catering. For example wet grounds were found to affect outside catering by 53% of the respondents mainly because movement is affected for fear of sliding and falling as the grounds become slippery and uncomfortable. Uneven ground was also found to affect outside catering especially the difficulty in balancing for the catering staff when setting tables. When tables are fixed on uneven ground, food and drink easily topple especially when one person leans on the table which eventually affects customer satisfaction as in effect the outcome of outside catering. Summary of findings are as shown on figure 5.

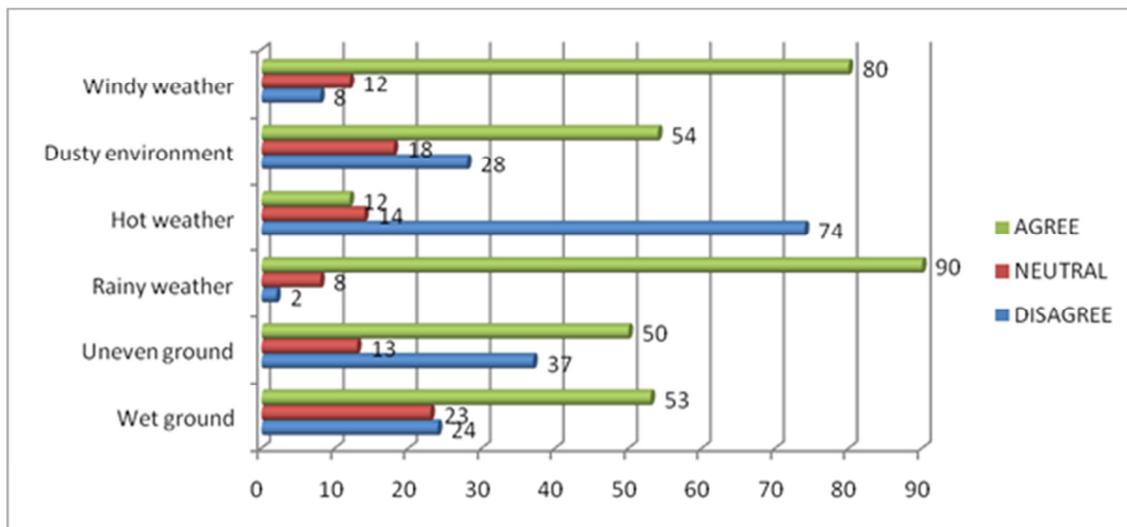


Figure 4: Natural factors on outcome of outside catering

4.2.5 Outcome Indicators

Outcome of outside catering was evaluated on the basis of customer satisfaction, comments elicited from customers, left over food on plates, complaints received from customers and enquiries made for repeat jobs. From the findings of indicators of outcome, 80% customers rated enquiries for repeat jobs as the best indicator, 74% rated customer satisfaction, 67% felt positive comments should be used, 58% when there is minimal or no left-over on the plates and only 50% no complaints from customers was an indicator of successful outcome of outside catering. Summary of these is presented on figure5.

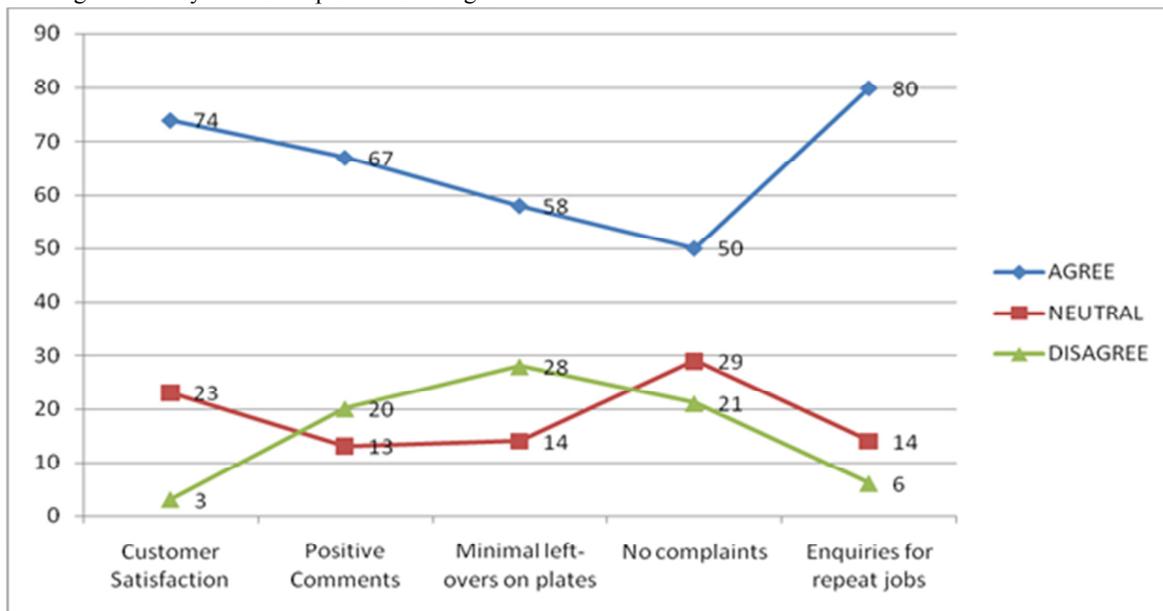


Figure 5: Outcome Indicators of Outside Catering

5. Conclusion

This study concluded that human factors especially poor planning, under charging customers, customers demanding services they did not agree on, customers being difficult in making payments and expecting services at very low prices affect the outcome of outside catering. Therefore caterers need to quote prices commensurate to the amount of work so that the outcome of outside catering meets the expectations of customers. On the same note, it is important for caterers and customers to communicate on all details effectively to avoid situations of misunderstanding. Physical factors especially inadequate service and cooking equipment, inadequate ingredients and poor source of energy all affect the outcome of outside catering. To reduce the effects on catering, caterers should prepare a list of all equipment required for the function to ensure none is forgotten and the right numbers are considered. In a situation that a caterer does not have adequate equipment, it is advisable for them to hire them from other caterers. Natural factors especially rainy and windy weather affect the outcome of outside catering. During rainy weather, movement of staff is affected since moving from point A to B becomes difficult. Wet grounds and dusty environment also affect outside catering. Uneven ground also affects the outcome of outside catering. Of all the natural factors, only hot weather does not affect outcome of outside catering since most caterers serve food under shade or tents when a function is on open grounds. However, there is very little control on issues pertaining to natural factors as they are beyond the caterer. The study also concludes that outcome of outside catering can be measured using enquiries made for repeat jobs, customer satisfaction, positive comments made by consumers, minimal left-over of food on plates and no or few complaints made by consumers. Caterers should invest enough time in planning for events by trying to understand the venue well before the day of the moment of truth and draw a plan of action. There should be full cooperation, trust and commitment between the caterer and customer in order to give the customer psychological satisfaction. Proper costing and portioning should be done by the caterer in order to minimise losses and at the same time satisfy guest so as to encourage repeat business. Caterers should be more frank to customer on the pricing aspect by trying to set up pricing policies that favor both the service provider and the customer. This may also be done by coming up with different

packages that are are priced differently in order to cater for the different customers.

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