Benchmarking in Independent Full-service Restaurants

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ABSTRACT The success of a restaurant depends on whether the entire restaurant team can deliver a service that meets the expectations of the customer. A possible course of action is for restaurant managers to use benchmarking to identify performance gaps. The primary objective of this study was to describe the role of restaurateurs' perceptions of benchmarking in independent full-service restaurants in South Africa. A quantitative research approach using a questionnaire to collect data from 116 restaurateurs was followed. Analysis of data was done using IBM SPSS V20. Benchmarking perceptions were analysed using factor analysis. Results revealed that one third of the respondents had never done a benchmarking exercise, although at least two thirds rated benchmarking as very to extremely important. Maintaining a competitive advantage was ranked as the most likely outcome of benchmarking. Benchmarking should become a priority in the restaurant industry to ensure successful restaurant operations.

INTRODUCTION

A restaurant will be able to maintain a competitive advantage only when food and beverage products as well as service quality are better than those of its competitors, the latest technology is applied, and costs are kept below those of its competitors. A restaurateur cannot plan to achieve these goals unless he or she is able to compare quality standards within the restaurant (anomalar) with those of industry leaders (exemplars) (Perramon et al. 2015). The management tool for comparing anomalar and exemplars is benchmarking. Benchmarking is both a quality improvement tool and a catalyst available to a restaurateur when developing strategies to sustain a competitive advantage (Iyer and Banerjee 2016). Rigby (2001) is of the opinion that benchmarking is the third most popular management tool to be applied in an endeavour to become an industry leader but it seems that the popularity of benchmarking as a managerial intervention has waned and recent research showed that as little as 39 percent of managers still make use of benchmarking (Adebanjo et al. 2010; Chen and Chuang 2012). Even though managers' interest

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in using benchmarking seems to be waning, researchers are still supporting benchmarking as an essential management tool employed by successful companies (Houssein et al. 2015). In essence, benchmarking is the process of finding and adopting industry best practice to understand and meet the needs and demands of customers better by using a variety of innovative ideas (Nassar 2012). Researchers have established that most companies modify existing benchmarking models to suit their own needs (Taschner 2016). Currently, there is no benchmarking model that has been specifically designed for the independent full-service restaurant industry in South Africa; therefore, a research project was undertaken to determine the extent to which generic benchmarking was done in named restaurants. The results from this research and future research will assist in developing a benchmarking model specifically for independent full-service restaurants in South Africa.

Moriarty (2011) defines benchmarking as "An exemplar-driven teleological process operating within an organisation with the objective of intentionally changing an anomalar's existing state of affairs into a superior state of affairs via causal and feasible exemplary processes."

Benchmarking is a continual process during which a restaurant that seeks to improve its tangible and intangible service qualities (anomalar) and to compare its current processes and outcomes with those of a superior restaurant (ex-

emplar) to identify performance gaps (Sweis 2015). The restaurateur needs to identify the gaps to gain a sound understanding of existing differences. The shortcomings can be addressed by implementing an improvement plan (Shokrol-lahpour et al. 2016; Swenson 2016). Other management aspects that appear in benchmarking definitions that have implications for management are measurement, learning and improved performance (Sweis et al. 2016).

The benchmarking cycle starts with the measurement of the aspect being benchmarked. This is then compared to the measurement of the exemplar. When the gap has been identified, improvement should follow and that aspect should then be monitored continually. Benchmarking activities foster organisational learning (Deng 2015). Organisational learning of what constitutes best practice will lead to superior performance of production and service and inevitably contribute to better financial results (Adewunmi et al. 2016).

Acquisition of information can be done by employing any of the following communication media: internal records, mail surveys, personal meetings, site visits, telephone interviews, electronic data, online services, professional associations, consultants and publications (Albertin et al. 2015). During the acquisition of information, the restaurateur could apply benchmarking to identify competitors' best practice. This best-practice information could then be communicated to restaurant employees during meetings or be incorporated into policies and standard procedures (Dembowski 2013). Employees will then interpret and adopt the acquired best practice for optimised use in their own environment. Once best practice has been amended and adopted, it will become part of the training programmes, as well as being evident in operational procedures (JoséÁngel et al. 2010).

Benchmarking is a strategically important facet of total quality management (TQM) as well as being an advanced TQM tool (Sweis et al. 2016). The competitive, dynamic, global business environment requires restaurateurs to implement innovative management philosophies and techniques to ensure delivery of industry-leading service quality (McAdam et al. 2000; Oghojafor et al. 2012; Oghojafor and Idowu 2012; Nair et al. 2015). Competitive advantage

can be gained by comparing efficacy and efficiency of competing restaurants. Once the comparisons have been completed, quality gaps identified and understood and corrective measures have been designed, it is imperative that the amended best-practice policy become an integral part in the quest for excellence (Horng and Teng 2011; Kale and Karaman 2011; Nassar 2012; Kaur 2016).

Camp (1993) describes the basic steps in the benchmarking process as follows planning (what? who? how?), analysis (gaps and trends), integration (all employees, new goals, new performance indicators), action (implementation, continual improvement) and maturity (incorporation of best practice). The benchmarking process of Camp (1993) has stood the test of time, and remains relevant as researchers still use Camp's basic steps when conducting benchmarking (Saunders et al. 2016). Benchmarking necessitates a critical analysis of the internal and external business environment that will result in strategic and operational business-practice improvement which, in turn, will affect the quality of service delivery and customer satisfaction (Yasin 2002; Sweis et al. 2015). Benchmarking is seen as a cost-effective method available to restaurateurs who wish to develop specific strategies to use technology to meet customer needs better, identify strengths and weaknesses, implement innovative ideas, ensure cost-effective procedures, inspire employees and stimulate improved production of quality products and services inevitably leading to a sustainable competitive advantage (Al-Ghamdi 2005; Hong et al. 2012; Nassar 2012).

Min and Min (2011) propose that, in the essential drive to achieve restaurant service excellence, benchmarking in terms of top competitive restaurants is a given. The positive influence of benchmarking on operational and business performance could be enhanced by taking cognisance of an organisation's own strengths and weaknesses and then setting relevant, challenging, best-practice goals (Ramanathan and Ramanathan 2016).

Organisations adopt benchmarking with the purpose of improving operations and competitiveness and ensuring technical outcomes (Hong et al. 2012). Moriarty (2011) reports that the restaurateur embarking on a benchmarking exercise should have in-depth knowledge and an understanding of all the procedures followed and activities in the restaurant before any comparative

studies can be undertaken. If the restaurateur lacks this basic understanding, he or she will be unable to analyse the reasons for causes of shortcomings, or fail to recognise the origin of such gaps. This inability to identify shortcomings implies that any corrective activities the restaurateur undertakes will not lead to the desired results.

The restaurateur who embarks on the benchmarking process is faced with a myriad possible models to choose from as there are over 60 benchmarking models available globally (Anand and Kodali 2008). These models originate from three main sources, namely academic research, consultants/experts and organisational practice. Consultant-based models frequently have the following five dimensions: strategy, organisation, process, design optimisation and technology. These five dimensions are then sub-divided into a number of best practices.

METHODOLOGY

This research followed a quantitative research design. The primary objective of the study was to describe restaurateurs' perceptions of benchmarking in independent full-service restaurants in South Africa. In order to achieve this objective, it was necessary to determine their engagement in benchmarking, types of relevant benchmarking and the outcomes of benchmarking.

As this study was aimed at determining benchmarking perceptions of independent full-service restaurateurs, all the participants were managers of independent full-service restaurants. Prospective participants for this study were gathered primarily by compiling a list of email addresses from four sources, namely the Yellow Pages directory, Braby's business directory and the Eat Out guide, as well as general Google searches. In total, 2,699 independent full-service restaurants in South Africa were identified and included in this study.

The researcher used secondary data to compile a questionnaire to collect data on perceptions of restaurateurs. Each questionnaire was administered using a self-completion method. The questionnaire sought to determine the restaurateurs' perceptions on benchmarking. The questionnaire was reviewed by a panel consisting of four academics with doctoral qualifications in hospitality-related topics and one re-

search statistician. At the time of the research, each academic had been teaching hospitality management subjects for more than 20 years. The panel evaluated the relevance of each item, reclassified each of the items, eliminated ambiguous items and added items to ensure consistency between the questions included in the questionnaire and the literature reviewed.

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of two sections. The demographic section comprised eight items and included a question that would have excluded non-independent full-service restaurants. This section required respondents to answer questions on: location, age, sex, qualifications, experience, size of restaurant according to number of staff members, turnover and seating. The second section covered benchmarking perceptions and comprised the following eight questions:

1) Indicate whether you have conducted benchmarking with other restaurants. (Respondents could select more than 1 option).
2) Which type of benchmarking would be most appropriate in a restaurant? (Respondents could select more than 1 option.)
3) How important is benchmarking in the restaurant industry? (5 options ranging from extremely important [1] to not at all important [5]).
4) How would you rate your benchmarking knowledge? (3 options, little or no, moderate, highly knowledgeable).
5) Rank the following possible outcomes of benchmarking in a restaurant from most likely (1) to least likely (10).
6) Rank the following possible barriers to the use of benchmarking in a restaurant from most likely (1) to least likely (13).
7) Rank the restaurant managerial areas from essential to benchmark (1) to not necessary to benchmark (5).
8) How important do you think the following activities are to ensure effective benchmarking? (5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 [extremely important] to 5 [not at all important]).

The questionnaire was distributed to the entire population of independent full-service restaurants in South Africa, which appeared on the database compiled by the Department of Hospitality Management at Tshwane University of

Technology over a number of years. This implied high levels of statistical confidence and allowed for the generalisation of results to the entire independent full-service restaurant industry (Coldwell and Herbst 2004).

The questionnaire was uploaded onto the web-based research SurveyMonkey system for administration of the questionnaire to participants. The survey was mailed to 2 699 participants of whom 116 responded, 198 opted out and 186 were returned because email addresses did not exist anymore. This means that 6.06 percent of the intended population responded. A low response rate is a common occurrence in research in the hospitality industry (Ravichandran and Arendt 2008). Analysis of data was done using IBM SPSS V20. The demographic data were reported in univariate format. Univariate data reflect the number of participants that falls into each of the various demographic categories.

RESULTS

The restaurants were categorised according to turnover and number of seats. Half (50.0%, n=54) of the restaurants had an annual turnover of less than R5 million (R1=$0.065 at the time of the research), while the rest were almost equally split between an annual turnover of between R5 million (26.9%, n=29) and R10 million (23.1%, n=25). The largest proportion of respondents reported that the restaurants had more than 100 seats (41.3%, n=45), followed by those that had 50 to 100 seats (36.7%, n=40) and those with fewer than 50 seats (22.0%, n=24).

When restaurateurs were asked whether they had engaged in benchmarking with other restaurants, a large proportion indicated that they had never done benchmarking (43.1%, n=47) (Table 1). The method that used most often by restaurateurs was to have conversations with other restaurateurs to learn from them (45.0%, n=49). Very few respondents had conducted formal benchmarking exercises (3.7%, n=4). As this question allowed for more than one option, it was determined that respondents selected 1.4 options each, which is an indication that they tended to have used more than one method of benchmarking.

The perception of restaurateurs on the types of benchmarking is presented in Table 2. Almost a third (29.4%, n=32) of the restaurateurs considered internal benchmarking to be appropriate. The type that was considered appropriate by the largest proportion of respondents was "competitor benchmarking" (62.4%, n=68). On average, the respondents selected 2.87 options each, which was an indication that they tended to consider multiple types of benchmarking as appropriate in a restaurant. Generic and collaborative benchmarking were seen as the two least favourite types of benchmarking (9.2%). Industry and performance benchmarking were rated as almost equally important (45.9% and 45.0%, respectively) by the restaurateurs.

The restaurateurs had to indicate their perception of how important benchmarking was in the restaurant industry. At least two thirds (67%, n=73) of the respondents considered benchmarking to be very to extremely important and only 4.6 percent (n=5) considered it to be not at all important. On average, respondents scored importance at 2.21 on a scale of 1 to 5 with smaller scores indicating higher levels of importance.

Table 1: Benchmarking activities conducted by restaurateurs

		Responses	
	N	*Percentage*	*Percentage of cases*
I have never done it	47	30.7	43.1
I have had conversations with other restaurateurs to learn from them	49	32.0	45.0
I have consulted restaurant business analysts/experts	10	6.5	9.2
I have networked with other restaurateurs at conferences or internet forums	18	11.8	16.5
I have collected restaurant-related data from websites and publications to use as benchmarks	25	16.3	22.9
I have conducted a formal benchmarking exercise	4	2.6	3.7
Total	153	100.0	140.4

Table 2: Perceptions of types of benchmarking important for restaurateurs

	Responses		
	N	Percentage	Percentage of cases
Internal benchmarking (Compares similar departments or functions within the restaurant.)	32	10.2	29.4
Competitor benchmarking (Compares activities with those of direct competitors.)	68	21.7	62.4
Industry benchmarking (Compares with all businesses in the same industry, even non-competitors.)	50	16.0	45.9
Generic benchmarking (Compares with businesses inside and outside the same industry.)	10	3.2	9.2
Global benchmarking (Compares with international businesses.)	14	4.5	12.8
Process benchmarking (Compares specific processes and operating systems.)	26	8.3	23.9
Functional benchmarking (Compares specific business processes with those of competitors.)	26	8.3	23.9
Performance benchmarking (Compares aspects such as speed, price and reliability.)	49	15.7	45.0
Strategic benchmarking (Compares goals to gain sustained competitive advantage.)	28	8.9	25.7
Collaborative benchmarking (Compares aspects of a sharing restaurant.)	10	3.2	9.2
Total	313	100.0	287.2

There was a reasonable degree of variation (co-efficient of variation (CV) = .473) among respondents' scores as indicated by the standard deviation of 1.046. This is an interesting result considering that 43 percent of restaurateurs indicated that they had never undertaken benchmarking even though they seemed to appreciate the importance of benchmarking.

Respondents were asked to rank 10 possible outcomes of benchmarking (Table 3). Of the respondents, 12.8 percent (n=14) ranked "Allocation of resources to critical activities" as the most likely outcome of benchmarking while 10.1 percent (n=11) of respondents ranked "Allocation of resources to critical activities" as the least likely outcome of benchmarking.

On a scale of 1 (most likely) to 10 (least likely), the largest proportion of respondents (14.7%, n=16) ranked the likelihood of "Allocation of resources to critical activities" as an outcome at level 5. The list of outcomes, if ordered according to frequency of most likely outcome, was as follows:

1) Maintains competitive advantage.
2) Improved customer satisfaction.
3) Establishes valid performance-measuring criteria.
4) Allocates resources to critical areas.
5) Improved financial results.

6) Determines the number of staff required.
7) Ensures cost-effective procedures.
8) Competitive pricing of items.
9) Informs strategic decisions.
10) Determines skills levels of staff.

On average, "Maintains competitive advantage" was ranked the highest of all the outcomes, but it also had the highest variation relative to the mean (CV=0.628), which means that for this outcome, there was the least agreement among respondents. The outcome with the most agreement among respondents was for "Informs strategic decisions", which was ranked the least likely outcome on the list on average.

Respondents' perceptions of which managerial area they felt should be prioritised for benchmarking were rated. They were expected to rank the managerial areas in order of importance from most important (1) to least important (5). The proportion of respondents who ranked "Operational activities" as the essential managerial area to benchmark was 27.5 percent (n=30) while the proportion of respondents who ranked "Operational activities" as the least important to benchmark was 15.6 percent (n=17). At level 1, the most important managerial area identified for benchmarking was "Customer service" (33.9%, n=37). When rankings one and two are combined, "Operational activities" scored slight-

Table 3: Benchmarking outcomes ranked according to importance

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mean	SD	CV
Allocates resources to critical activities	14 12.8%	7 6.4%	7 6.4%	14 12.8%	16 14.7%	10 9.2%	11 10.1%	13 11.9%	6 5.5%	11 10.1%	109 100.0%	5.41	2.809	0.519
Establishes valid performance measure criteria	16 14.7%	19 17.4%	12 11.0%	12 11.0%	6 5.5%	10 9.2%	10 9.2%	9 8.3%	7 6.4%	8 7.3%	109 100.0%	4.71	2.90	0.62
Maintains competitive advantage	21 19.3%	15 13.8%	18 16.5%	10 9.2%	10 9.2%	14 12.8%	8 7.3%	3 2.8%	7 6.4%	3 2.8%	109 100.0%	4.15	2.606	0.628
Determines number of staff required	6 5.5%	14 12.8%	12 11.0%	12 11.0%	12 11.0%	9 8.3%	6 5.5%	12 11.0%	14 12.8%	12 11.0%	109 100.0%	5.65	2.888	0.511
Determines skills levels of staff	4 3.7%	6 5.5%	10 9.2%	13 11.9%	18 16.5%	10 9.2%	20 18.3%	11 10.1%	11 10.1%	6 5.5%	109 100.0%	5.83	2.380	0.408
Ensures cost effective procedures	9 8.3%	9 8.3%	19 17.4%	15 13.8%	9 8.3%	16 14.7%	15 13.8%	6 5.5%	8 7.3%	3 2.8%	109 100.0%	4.95	2.451	0.495
Improved customer satisfaction	18 16.5%	12 11.0%	11 10.1%	13 11.9%	10 9.2%	11 10.1%	13 11.9%	5 4.6%	5 4.6%	11 10.1%	109 100.0%	4.85	2.909	0.600
Competitive pricing of items	5 5.5%	12 11.0%	5 4.6%	8 7.3%	12 11.0%	12 11.0%	8 7.3%	29 26.6%	10 9.2%	7 6.4%	109 100.0%	6.03	2.647	0.439
Informs strategic decisions	5 4.6%	4 3.7%	6 5.5%	7 6.4%	13 11.9%	8 7.3%	11 10.1%	11 10.1%	24 22.0%	20 18.3%	109 100.0%	6.91	2.696	0.390
Improved financial results	10 9.2%	11 10.1%	9 8.3%	5 4.6%	3 2.8%	9 8.3%	7 6.4%	10 9.2%	17 15.6%	28 25.7%	109 100.0%	6.51	3.262	0.501

ly higher at n=65 and "Customer service" at n=64 (Table 4).

On average, "Customer service" was ranked the essential managerial area to benchmark among those listed and it also had the second highest variation relative to the mean (CV=0.537), which indicated that for this managerial area, there was the second least agreement among respondents (Table 4). The managerial area with the most agreement among the respondents was "Human resources" (CV=.328) and it was ranked closer to the not essential side of the scale (M=3.53, SD 1.159) on average.

The restaurateurs had to rate the importance of various benchmarking activities from extremely important to not at all important. Close to 60 percent (57.8%, n=63) of respondents considered "Obtain management commitment" as extremely important while almost 90 percent (88.1%, n=96) considered it at least very important (Table 5). Only two (1.8%) respondents did not consider "Obtain management commitment" important.

On a scale of 1 (extremely important) to 5 (not at all important), the largest proportion of respondents (68.8%, n=75) rated "Improve quality continually" as an activity that is important to facilitate benchmarking at level 1.

The ranking of benchmarking activities according to the number of respondents who indicated a preference for extremely important was as follows:

1) Improve quality continually.
2) Secure management commitment.
3) Adapt and implement best practices in your own restaurant.
4) Identify best practices during visit.
5) Select possible restaurant benchmarking partners.
6) Plan benchmarking processes.

7) Manage continual relationship with restaurant benchmarking partner.
8) Select restaurant process for benchmarking.
9) Prepare for visit to identified restaurant.
10) Identify one restaurant from list of possible partners.

Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation of activity scores. On average, "Improve quality continually" was rated the most important activity among those listed to ensure effective benchmarking and it also had the highest variation relative to the mean (CV=0.579), which implies that for this activity, there was the least agreement among respondents.

The activity with the most agreement among respondents was "Identify one restaurant from list of possible partners" (CV=.376). On average, this was rated as closer to the not important side of the scale (M=2.63, SD 0.988) than the other listed activities. However, its average importance rating was still closer to the important side of the scale than the not important side (M=2.63 below middle value of scale).

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that almost half of the restaurateurs had never done benchmarking. Benchmarking reluctance could be attributed to concerns regarding the perception of soundness of benchmarking (Williams et al. 2012), concerns about the internal capacity of an organisation (McDonnel and Jones 2010), resistance to change (Arnold and Zink 2010) and fear of specific consequences (David and William 2010). Only a small number of restaurateurs in this study had carried out a formal benchmarking exercise. This is in contrast with the findings of Nassar (2012)

Table 4: Managerial areas ranked according to importance

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Mean	SD	CV
Operational activities	30	35	16	11	17	109	2.54	1.398	0.550
	27.5%	32.1%	14.7%	10.1%	15.6%	100.0%			
Financial activities	21	23	33	17	15	109	2.83	1.295	0.458
	19.3%	21.1%	30.3%	15.6%	13.8%	100.0%			
Customer service	37	27	26	11	8	109	2.32	1.246	0.537
	33.9%	24.8%	23.9%	10.1%	7.3%	100.0%			
Human resources	6	18	20	42	23	109	3.53	1.159	0.328
	5.5%	16.5%	18.3%	38.5%	21.1%	100.0%			
Marketing activities	15	6	14	28	46	109	3.77	1.405	0.373
	13.8%	5.5%	12.8%	25.7%	42.2%	100.0%			

Table 5: Reasons for benchmarking activities

	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important	Total	Mean	SD	CV
Secures management commitment	63 57.8%	33 30.3%	11 10.1%	0 0.0%	2 1.8%	109 100.0%	1.58	0.820	0.519
Select restaurant process for benchmarking	19 17.4%	52 47.7%	33 30.3%	3 2.8%	2 1.8%	109 100.0%	2.24	0.838	0.374
Plan benchmarking process	23 21.1%	47 43.1%	32 29.4%	4 3.7%	3 2.8%	109 100.0%	2.24	0.922	0.412
Select possible restaurant benchmarking partners	24 22.0%	44 40.4%	30 27.5%	8 7.3%	3 2.8%	109 100.0%	2.28	0.982	0.431
Identify one restaurant from list of possible partners	13 11.9%	36 33.0%	43 39.4%	12 11.0%	5 4.6%	109 100.0%	2.63	0.988	0.376
Prepare for visit to identified restaurant	17 15.6%	52 47.7%	29 26.6%	7 6.4%	4 3.7%	109 100.0%	2.35	0.946	0.403
Identify best practices during visit	30 27.5%	55 50.5%	17 15.6%	5 4.6%	2 1.8%	109 100.0%	2.03	0.887	0.403
Adapt and implement best practices in your own restaurant	43 39.4%	53 48.6%	11 10.1%	0 0.0%	2 1.8%	109 100.0%	1.76	0.781	0.444
Manage continual relationship with restaurant benchmarking partner	22 20.2%	47 43.1%	26 23.9%	9 8.3%	5 4.6%	109 100.0%	2.34	1.038	0.444
Improve quality continually.	75 68.8%	24 22.0%	7 6.4%	0 0.0%	3 2.8%	109 100.0%	1.46	0.845	0.579

where it was found that 75 percent of hotels in Egypt had benchmarking experience.

The type of benchmarking considered to be most appropriate for the restaurateurs was competitor benchmarking. Externally imposed benchmarking has a number of advantages in that it secures participation from many organisations and ensures a better overview of the effects of different processes on performance (Nassar 2012). Internal benchmarking is often seen as a useful first step in benchmarking (Southard and Parente 2007).

Although the actual practice of benchmarking is unknown, at least two thirds of the restaurateurs considered benchmarking to be a very to extremely important exercise. This is alarming if the competitiveness of the restaurant industry is taken into consideration. Restaurateurs have the perception that the most likely outcome of benchmarking is to maintain a competitive advantage followed by improved customer satisfaction. Benchmarking is a tool to ensure competitive advantage (Twaissi and Alhelalat 2015; Kaur 2016; Sweis et al. 2016). Participants from Egyptian hotels agreed that benchmarking

is both a competitive strategy and a way of improving quality (Nassar 2012). Although "Maintaining a competitive advantage" was ranked highest by the restaurateurs, there was a high variation relative to the mean, which means that the respondents differed on the relative importance of this outcome.

Furthermore, it was interesting to note that the restaurateurs did not think that benchmarking would improve the competitive pricing of items as this was one of the lowest ranked items although it is seen in literature as one of the main advantages of benchmarking (Rigby 2011). When the restaurateurs' perceptions of which managerial area should be prioritised for benchmarking, "Customer service" was ranked as essential. This correlated with responses to the previous question on the outcomes of benchmarking where "Improved customer satisfaction" was ranked as the second-highest likely outcome.

The above indicated that restaurateurs realised the importance of customer satisfaction in maintaining a competitive business. Customer satisfaction is the result of excellent service qual-

ity. Improved quality was ranked as the highest benchmarking activity and was rated extremely important by most restaurateurs. A competitive advantage in the restaurant industry could be ensured through delivering a service that meets or even exceeds customer expectations (Mhlanga and Machingambi 2016). In order to be successful in the hospitality industry, service satisfaction is of utmost importance (Cano et al. 2011). Proactive strategies will improve a restaurant's competitive position.

CONCLUSION

The restaurateurs indicated that benchmarking could contribute to maintaining a competitive advantage. However, in contrast to these findings, benchmarking remains a quality management tool that is seldom used in South African restaurants, even though restaurateurs realise its importance. Regular benchmarking exercises should be part of managerial functions to stay ahead in the competitive international and South African restaurant industry. A possible reason for the low rate of benchmarking implementation could be difficulty in finding benchmarking exemplars. The success of the restaurant can only be ensured if the entire restaurant team can deliver a service that they know meets or even exceeds the expectations of the customer. A possible course of action is for restaurant managers to use benchmarking to identify performance gaps and then to address these gaps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The reasons for restaurateurs not being involved in benchmarking activities should be determined. A framework or model for restaurant benchmarking should be developed and incorporated into training programmes for the hospitality industry. The importance of benchmarking could also be emphasised in the curriculum of relevant courses to ensure that young employees realise the importance thereof. Restaurateurs should be made aware of the advantages of benchmarking and its application in their restaurants. Restaurant employees should also be informed about benchmarking to obtain their support in benchmarking exercises, as benchmarking could have a positive economic effect on the restaurant industry. This study identified ample aspects for further research into benchmarking in restaurants.

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