

A firm is as good as its customer service

Financial strength, product quality, workplace policies come next: survey

By **MICHELLE QUAH**

[SINGAPORE] Having a good corporate reputation these days means far more than just good governance, transparency and brand strength — the marketplace is looking first and foremost for a strong personal relationship between a company and its customers, says a new study.

The Corporate Reputation Survey 2006 found most of the 600 members of the public in Singapore it surveyed focus most on how well a company treats its customers before deciding if the company has a good reputation.

The findings differ from those of a 2005 survey, in which respondents picked financial strength, the quality of a company's products and its workplace policies as the most important factors in determining its reputation.

But such traditional fac-

tors — besides others such as the appearance of good governance, disclosure and transparency — were considered a "given" by respondents in the 2006 poll.

In other words, it found Singaporeans already expect good companies to possess the traditional traits and are now also looking at customer service to differentiate the best from the good.

This year, the public picked global giant Citibank as having the best reputation in the banking sector. Citibank beat local rival DBS Bank, which topped the rankings in 2005.

SingTel and Shell topped the mobile phone and petroleum sectors respectively, while BreadTalk had the best reputation among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The companies were scored according to a Corporate Reputation Index that measures their ability to manage activities that directly contribute to their reputation — such as their focus on their employees, their market and customers, their shareholders, the community and their financial performance.

Reputation Management Associates (RMA), which commissioned the survey, said respondents named customer service the most important contributing factor to a company's reputation in all of the six industry sectors the survey looked at.

"The results of the survey clearly indicate that in this new 'Show Me' world, customers and the public place top priority on being served, heard and engaged," said RMA chief executive John Lim.

"Companies will do well to identify and enforce processes to put the customer in the centre of their business universe," he added.

Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS), which conducted the survey via the Internet, sought the views of 600 Singapore residents aged 18-55 — who it described as "a good representation of the total Singapore population" — between November and December.

In the banking sector, after Citibank and DBS, respondents ranked United Overseas Bank third and OCBC Bank fourth. Foreign banks HSBC, Standard Chartered, Maybank, ABN Amro and Bank of China were ranked after them.

For mobile phone providers, SingTel held on to its 2005 number one ranking, while StarHub and M1 switched places to be ranked second and third respectively in 2006.

In both the banking and the mobile phone sectors, survey respondents felt it most important for companies to provide good service — for example, having personalised customer service and valuing customer satisfaction and feedback — and to offer good products at competitive rates.

They also felt it important for companies to communicate regularly with customers and the public.

NTUC Income Insurance came out tops in the general and life insurance sectors — with respondents again looking at the level of customer service provided by insurers, such as how fast, how clearly and how consistently they settle claims.

AIG and Aviva General Insurance were ranked second and third respectively, in the general insurance category. Great Eastern Life Assurance and AIA were second and third in the life assurance sector.

In the SME sector — a new category in the 2006 survey — respondents picked BreadTalk as having the best corporate reputation. Tiger Balm, Old Chang Kee and Lee Hwa Jewellery were ranked after it.

In this sector, respondents not only looked closely at how well an SME treated its customers but also at how well it treated its employees.

While staff welfare was also an important consideration in the bigger-company sectors, respondents paid special attention to this factor when ranking SMEs — looking for HR policies that value and reward staff.

Mr Lim said he hopes to extend the survey to other Asian cities such as Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur. "Hopefully, in a few years' time, we'll be able to put out an Asian reputation survey every 24 months," he said.

RMA is also looking to refine its Singapore survey so respondents can rank companies across sectors, comparing leaders from different industries.

The best

Singapore companies with the best reputations

Retail banking	Citibank
Mobile service providers	SingTel
SMEs	BreadTalk
General insurance	NTUC Income
Life insurance	NTUC Income
Petroleum	Shell

Note: The Corporate Reputation Survey 2006, commissioned by Reputation Management Associates, is conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres