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Hiring only good-lookers

Service industries make no excuses for hiring people based on looks rather than skill for frontline jobs

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Wanted: Service staff who are competent but more importantly, young, fun and cute.

Sorry if you do not possess all of the above attributes. The job will probably go to the better-looking candidate.

Hospitality and retail businesses are looking for not just the best workers, but also good-looking ones.

Diners will notice this when they step into Heaven's Loft restaurant-bar, which opens next Wednesday at Orchard Central shopping mall.

They will be surrounded by beautiful people at this 557 sq m hangout. More than half of the 50 service staff are women such as Alexandra Lee, 17, and Lee Shufen, 18, who are known as "Angels".

The fact that they are good-looking is no coincidence. They landed their jobs precisely because they are so.

In fact, hiring service staff because they are young and good-looking is a growing trend here.

Check out the yummy bartenders at New Asia club in Swissotel The Stamford hotel and the cute Japanese barmen at Orgo, a two-month-old rooftop bar at the Esplanade, for example.

Home-grown fashion brand, New Urban Male.com, which retails unisex casual wear, hires only young men as sales assistants, and hunky ones too.

These guy-candy even get to model the clothes at fashion shows.

The brand has 200 full- and part-time sales assistants aged between 18 and 25 working at 16 stores. Many are tertiary students.

Founder Chua Shenzi, 39, says: "When we opened six years ago, the first few batches of employees happened to be all-male, sporty types. They formed an identity for the brand.

"We decided to stick to the concept, hence we have turned down female applicants who wanted to work for us."

However, some job-seekers say the practice of choosing employees just on their looks smacks of discrimination.

Cafe supervisor Eddie Tan, 24, says: "Employers should hire by skill and experience. The candidate may not look good but if he is willing to learn, he should be given a chance."

In February last year, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (Tafep) launched the "Hire On Merit, Be A Fair Employer" campaign to encourage employers to hire based on skill, experience or ability.

So far, the Ministry of Manpower and the alliance have not received any complaint against employers who hire based on job applicants' looks.

Mr Josh Goh, a senior manager (corporate services) at human resource consultancy firm GMP Group, says: "If a brand wants to target a certain group of customers, the employer would probably hire someone who fits the image. This usually applies to frontline staff.

"In this case, the requirements may not be deemed as discriminatory."

If an employer hires someone with certain physical attributes not relevant to the job, it could be viewed as a form of discrimination, he adds.

There is one thing that the good-looker has in common with the average person looking for a service job - the pay.

Whether hot babe or coyote ugly, the part-timers earn between \$7 and \$10 an hour in the food and beverage industry.

Take Heaven's Loft Angel Alexandra Lee. Doe-eyed Miss Lee, who is pursuing a three-year course in child psychology in Ngee Ann Polytechnic, is not paid a premium for her looks.

The teenager, a Eurasian of English and Chinese descent, tells LifeStyle: "I want to get some experience in the service line. I enjoy what I do and the extra pocket money comes in handy."

The perk: She gets to be styled, photographed and featured in Heaven's Loft's quarterly magazine called Infuse, which is given to customers.

Like the other Angels, she had to go through several rounds of "auditions" before being hired, says Heaven's Loft operator Wong Toon King, 42, who also runs home-grown food and beverage company The Happy People Co.

His company also operates the Ben & Jerry's local chain of ice cream parlours, known for its cute ice-cream scoopers aged between 17 and 25.

Potential candidates, many of them students, usually write to the company to apply for a job, says Mr Wong, a father of two girls aged 11 and six.

“They are recommended by friends who work for us. But we are very particular. From 100 applicants, we will shortlist and hire only 10,” he adds.

“We want to be sure that they like the products we sell. Besides being friendly or well-spoken, frontline staff should look pleasing to the eye.”

But do not confuse Mr Wong’s Angels with Hooters girls – waitresses at the 12-year-old Clarke Quay branch of American diner Hooters whose uniform is cleavage-enhancing tight tank-tops and sexy red shorts.

The Angels at Heaven’s Loft wear preppy-looking baby-Tees, jeans and sneakers.

Mr Wong says: “Customers do appreciate what they see and it completes the experience of patronising the outlet.”

However, brands cannot succeed with just having good-lookers, notes Ms Shauna Li-Roolvink, founder of brand consultancy BrandHub.

“They should also offer a satisfactory overall customer experience,” she says.

Indeed, the former Carrie Models Club wine bar in Orchard Cineleisure folded less than two years after it opened in 1999. It had fashion models doubling up as waitresses.

Even the the bra-less hostesses at the now-defunct Asian restaurant-bar at Eu Tong Sen Street could not pull in the crowds when it opened in 2001. The concept was replaced by a Chinese restaurant a year later.

Mr Wong says the cuties at Heaven’s Loft are service-oriented.

He is confident that it will be a hit as it is the mall’s largest food and beverage outlet incorporating a 230-seater restaurant serving mid-priced American-French cuisine, a bar and a Ben & Jerry’s ice-cream parlour.

Diners can also chill out at the 80-seat outdoor verandah overlooking Orchard Road from the eighth floor.

He adds: “The service staff is like the icing on the cake and they suit the trendy concept.”

While some patrons say good-looking staff are a draw, others place efficiency before physical appearance.

Sales executive Howard Chng, 37, says: “I’ll patronise an outlet more often because it offers good service, affordable pricing, nice ambience and a wide variety on its menu. Looks are subjective.”

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