

Pret A Manger

When college friends Sinclair and Julian opened their first store in London in 1986, they wanted to *'make proper sandwiches avoiding the obscure chemicals, additives and preservatives common to so much of the "prepared" and "fast" food on the market'*. They created the sort of food they themselves craved but couldn't find anywhere else. Now there are over 300 Pret shops worldwide, most of them in the UK. The company are particularly proud of their customer service. *'We'd like to think we react to our customers' feelings (the good, the bad, the ugly) with haste and absolute sincerity'*, they say. *'Pret customers have the right to be heard. Do call or email. Our UK Managing Director is available if you would like to discuss Pret with him. Alternatively, our CEO hasn't got much to do; hassle him!'*

It's a bold approach to customer service, but Pret has always been innovative. Described by the press as having *'revolutionised the concept of sandwich making and eating'*, Pret A Manger opened its first shop in London and now has over 260 shops in the UK, New York, Hong Kong and Tokyo. The founders say that their secret is to focus continually on the quality of the food and the service. They avoid the chemicals and preservatives common in most 'fast' food. *'Many food retailers focus on extending the shelf life of their food, but that's of no interest to us. We sell food that can't be beaten for freshness. At the end of the day, we give whatever we haven't sold to charity to help feed those who would otherwise go hungry. Pret A Manger shops have their own kitchen where fresh ingredients are delivered every morning, with food prepared throughout the day. The team members serving on the tills at lunchtime will have been making sandwiches in the kitchen that morning. We are determined never to forget that our hardworking people make all the difference. They are our heart and soul. When they care, our business is sound. If they cease to care, our business goes down the drain. In a retail sector where high staff turnover is normal, we're pleased to say our people are much more likely to stay around! We work hard at building great teams. We take our reward schemes and career opportunities very seriously. We don't work nights (generally), we wear jeans, we party!'*

Customer feedback is regarded as being particularly important at Pret. Examining customers' comments for improvement ideas is a key part of weekly management meetings, and of the daily team briefs in each shop. Moreover, staff at Pret are rewarded in cash for being nice to customers; they collect bonuses for delivering outstanding customer service. Every week, a secret shopper who scores the shop on such performance measures as speed of service, product availability and cleanliness visits each Pret outlet. In addition, the mystery shopper rates the 'engagement level' of the staff; questions include, 'Did servers connect with eye contact, a smile and some polite remarks?' Assessors score out of 50. If the store gets 43 points or more every team member receives an extra payment for every hour worked; and if an individual is mentioned by the mystery shopper for providing outstanding service they get an additional payment. *'The emphasis on jollity and friendliness has been a winner'*, said James Murphy – a management consultant for Future Foundation. *'In the highly competitive sandwich market, that's been a big contributor to their success.'* But not everyone agrees with using mystery shoppers. *'It is the equivalent of asking one customer in a shop what they thought at that exact moment, and then planning an entire store-improvement strategy around the one piece of feedback'*, says Jeremy Michael of the Service Management Group, another consultancy.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is Pret-A-Manger competitive priority?
2. Describe the company's operations strategy?