Newton touts are still in business

Patrons complain of being caught in 'turf wars' between various stall helpers

The $4.8 million makeover of Newton Food Centre two years ago has not cleaned up one black spot -- touting for business by stall assistants.

In recent letters to The Straits Times' Forum page, customers complained of being caught in "turf wars" between hawker and business assistants who vie for business.

"Customers like civil servant Kelvin Law, 32, note that competition is especially severe for one group of stall owners -- those who sell barbecued seafood.

"There are 28 such stalls, making up a whopping one-third of the 83 stalls in the centre popular with tourists and Singaporeans."

"Some also questioned why some stalls had as many as eight assistants when they were legally allowed only four."

The Sunday Times visited Newton several times last week and found that the touts were indeed active -- but not outrightly persistent.

At least three assistants accosted us with menus when we entered the open-air eating area. But all backed off when we said "no". Stall assistants looked merely disappointed when we sat in front of their stalls but refused to order from them.

According to the National Environment Agency (NEA) which runs the food centre, nine stalls have been suspended for two weeks for touting since its reopening in July 2006. Some 14 stall assistants were banned for a year from working there.

In addition, 14 unregistered assistants were caught, with five stalls suspended for repeat offences.

The NEA also spent $47,000 to install 16 closed-circuit television cameras in September last year to monitor the goings-on, and officers do weekly patrols. Signs remind patrons that they can sit anywhere.

Despite such efforts, many stall owners feel that touting in hard to eradicate.

The intense competition has spurred some hawker to snap pictures of other stalls' assistants engaged in touting as evidence for NEA officers. The occasional fight has broken out over this, said stallholder Maggie Chan, S2.

One hawker, who gave his name only as Mr Lim, said NEA officers may come in plainclothes to conduct checks but "we recognise them and the touts sit down for a coffee break".

"If the NEA wants to control touting, why not first control the number of seafood stall licences?" STALLHOLDER MAGGIE CHAN

Limit seafood stalls

Echoing a common refrain among most hawker, Madam Chan asked: "If the NEA wants to control touting, why not first control the number of seafood stall licences?"

An NEA spokesman said it is "our policy to let market forces determine the trade mix".

But food guide Makansutra founder K.F. Seetoh, who also runs Gluttons Bay at the Esplanade Mall, feels a little regulation could go a long way.

"In most private foodcourts or hawker centres, you don't see very similar stalls, which may tempt stallholders to tout."

Though touting also exists at Lau Pa Sat market's Satay Street and outside the bars in Boat Quay, Dr Lily Kong feels it is worse in Newton because it attracts more tourists.

"It is more likely for tourists to 'guide' tourists unfamiliar with hawker centres in their purchase of food and drinks as compared to locals who are wise to local food, prices and systems," said the National University of Singapore professor who last year published a book about hawker centres.

Mr Christian Abulencia, 28, a Filipino hawker who has been working here for 1½ years, agreed. Recalling his first time at Newton Food Centre as a tourist in 2005, he said he "felt like a piece of meat thrown into a lion's den".

"It might be a culture shock for first-timers and foreigners. But it won't stop me from taking foreign friends there -- I now know which stalls to order from," he said.

But not all fearful of sales pitches, Norwegian student Karl Fredrik Stalbo, 22, said he was approached by at least six touts on his first visit but felt they were less aggressive than those in Bali.

He would continue to patronise Newton because it is clean, breezy and has good, affordable food. Singaporean sales executive May Chua, 30, has no complaints too.

"At the end of a long day, I can come here, have someone take my order and bring my food and drinks to me. And I don't have to tip or pay a service charge," she said.