Want trays cleared?
Make it clear

S'poreans need clear signals to be converted to good habit, say experts

BY JUDITH TAN

WANT Singaporeans to clean up after themselves? Tell them exactly how.

Given their penchant for abiding by rules, they are likely to follow directions for cleaning up, especially in an environment where everyone else is doing the same, say experts.

"Having visible signs and stations telling people to do so will get the message across, for a start," said Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, who heads the sociology department at the National University of Singapore.

Clear signals are the key to conversion.

"Perhaps there should not be a back-up team of cleaners to clear up the mess after diners, or they will think it's acceptable to leave the table and the mess," she said.

The Straits Times is launching an effort to encourage diners to return their trays, with posters, stickers and hanging mobiles serving as clear reminders at five Kopitiam outlets islandwide.

The common sight of uncleaned trays at foodcourts is not just an eyesore, but also points to the need for Singaporeans to brush up on their social graces.

Indeed, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pointed out at this year's National Day Rally that improving in such areas was important because the well-being of Singaporeans depended not just on bread-and-butter issues but also on how people behaved and related to one another.

Agreeing, Prof Straughan said Singaporeans must be active stakeholders.

"If you see someone walk off, call them back to let them know what the expectations are. It is only through active social policing that we can encourage non-conformists to play their part," she said.

To make tray clearing a breeze, clearly visible stations should be manned to ensure they are clean, and that there is always space for used utensils. Sinks around the collection stations also make it more convenient for patrons to clean up after.

Prof Straughan cited a foodcourt in Tokyo Disneyland as a model of such an environment.

"There is a large return station with clear indicators of which utensils should go to which area.

"There are also sinks and wipes, so that when you are done clearing your tray, you can rinse off and dry your hands. Everyone was doing it, and the cleaners were there to clear the collection area and clean the tables," she said.

Banker and foodcourt regular Nicolas Chong suggested that instructions be spelt out to a T: "If there are bold signs telling people to return their trays to the designated stations, I'm sure they will."

Repeating the action will turn it into a habit - and a good one at that.

Dr Ng Beng Yeeong, head of psychiatry at the Singapore General Hospital, said: "Over time, performing the task will become second nature."

Although some blame the traditional preference for communal dining for creating messy tables, regular foodcourt diners say that is no excuse.

Said retired teacher Esther Wong: "Many of us clear our plates after a meal with the family at home."

"I don't see why it should be any different when we share food at a hawker centre or a foodcourt."

But to truly make Singaporeans gracious, the effort must be sustained by individuals.

To change mindssets, it is important to create a culture that encourages cleanliness, said consultant psychiatrist Adrian Wang.

A campaign, such as The Straits Times' Goodness Gracious Me! effort, would show only short-term results if not backed by a long-term strategy, he added. "Old habits die hard."

To improve overall social graces, "we need to start young. It means setting an example for children. "Kids mirror adults. That's why we need to behave well before we can teach our kids manners."
What does your dirty tray say about you? Psychologist Vanessa von Auer takes a look at three types of food mess and shares her insights.

- **Plates stacked with leftover food in the top plate**
  “This ‘semi-neat’ tray user knows someone will have to clean up his food mess and wants to make this task easier. He likes order – probably not only with meals but in his life – as the plates are stacked according to size and only the central one has the leftovers.

  Although his office may be spotless and organised, you are sure to find one spot of messiness somewhere in his house.”

- **Plates with leftover food stacked one on top of the other**
  “This person tries to ‘help’ by stacking his dishes. Though well-intentioned, this tray user does not realise that stacking filled plates will only make it more difficult for the cleaner to transport or dump.

  In his private life, this person has similarly good intentions. He is able to empathise, but often, he is in his own world, where ‘stacking filled plates’ means doing good.”

- **Used plates, bowls and food debris left all over. Tray is empty**
  “This says ‘the cleaning auntly will take care of my mess’; the user does not care about presentation or what others think of him. He enjoys his meal without other concerns. He also does not take into consideration that some poor cleaner will have to handle his messy leftovers.

  He is not empathetic to the cleaning crew or the patrons. He is confident about himself and does not care much about how he is perceived by others.”