

A UNIQUE BLEND

Adding a human touch to the technology helps customers adjust to using new DIY solutions

THE concept of self-service machines is not new in Singapore – more and more food and beverage (F&B) outlets now have iPads with self-help menus which immediately send orders directly to the kitchen while retail outlet chains more often than not have at least a row of self-checkout counters.

But are the solutions that are available in the market right for your business? And how can it be further tailored for your specific needs? These were the questions faced by two business owners – Fee Five Fo, the company behind the Five bars; and Sheng Siong Group, which operates the chain of Sheng Siong supermarkets.

For Fee Five Fo, moving from its full-service concept into a self-service one was a logical next step given the size of its latest undertaking – the 13,000 sq ft Five Square at Great Eastern Centre which has the capacity to sit about 600 people. There were two options available – the pager system where customers are given a buzzer or a screen which flashed completed orders to notify patrons that their food was ready.

“Most self-service places use a pager system but this still needs staff to link the buzzer to the order. So for instance, someone needs to link buzzer 61 to order 12, and when the food is ready, they will buzz buzzer 61,” says Goh Ying Nan, director at Fee Five Fo.

The screen on the other hand did not fit Five Square’s requirements given that the space houses five food stalls in the food hall, a bar, a whiskey corner fashioned after a speakeasy, and a wine corner. Instead, the team decided to install 10 self-ordering and payment kiosks which send food orders directly to the kitchen, along with a QR code that is generated with each order. After the order is prepared, the kitchen staff would simply scan the QR code, and an SMS would be sent to the customer’s mobile phone.

“We thought that this is the best place to do it because if you cannot get the early adopters in Raffles Place to use this system, then this system won’t work anywhere. It’s like ordering through an iPad – most people around here know how to do that,” says Mr Goh. “We do get the odd uncle or auntie who comes in here and gets lost, but we will guide them along. Generally, the pick-up from the PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) around here is pretty good.”

Despite the fact that this solution has enabled the company to reduce the manpower headcount by about 10, this is not a solution that the group is looking to import to its three other outlets. “Our existing stalls have been operating on the full-service model. If we suddenly cut it out, there may be a bit of backlash. It’s also challenging in the sense that we have space constraints – in our existing outlets, we have maximised the space for tables and chairs. I will probably have to lose some tables and chairs if I put in the machines and provide sufficient space for people to queue. So that’s one of the constraints of retrofitting

SPEEDY SERVICE ➤

Mr Lim notes that the full self-payment kiosks process payment faster than customers paying through cashiers

our current outlets with these. But we’re definitely looking to put these in our new outlets,” says Mr Goh.

For Sheng Siong on the other hand, the journey of testing and developing, and modifying its self-payment system began in 2014, after evaluating solutions from Sweden and Japan. The result is a full self-payment kiosk which accepts credit cards, debit cards, Nets or cash – a first in Singapore’s supermarket scene.

The second key difference is that frontline staff at Sheng Siong’s Segar outlet – where the group is doing a trial run of the new process – help customers scan and pack their selected items at scan-and-pack counters before directing these customers to designated self-payment kiosks.

“Instead of having our cashiers scan, pack and collect payment, we train our staff to scan and pack customers’ items faster and more efficiently than customers. Since most customers are familiar with banks’ ATMs, they can then help themselves with the payment the self-service way,” explains Lim Hock Chee, chief executive officer of Sheng Siong Group. “The machines process payment faster than customers paying through cashiers. With the self-payment kiosks, customers’ queue time can be greatly reduced by 20-30 per cent and productivity is increased,” he adds.

The Sheng Siong Segar store is currently equipped with three scan-and-pack counters and seven self-payment kiosks. Based on the store’s 5,000 sq ft footprint, the grocer would require five “traditional” counters. Having the three scan-and-pack counters results in manpower savings (staff numbers at counters have been reduced from five to three persons which translates into savings of four counter personnel over two shifts).

There is also reduced work stress on staff and improvement in service – cashiers/tellers no longer need to prepare a cash float for each checkout counter, and frontline staff are not required to stay back at the end of each shift to do shift closure and reconciliation given that there can be no shortage resulting from human error.

Following the success of its first hybrid self-checkout store in Segar, Sheng Siong will be working with Spring to extend this concept to other pilot stores in the next few months. There are also plans to implement this payment system in six other Sheng Siong stores by the end of this year. ■

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SINGAPORE RETAIL INDUSTRY CONFERENCE

The 24th annual Singapore Retail Industry Conference (SRIC) will be held on Sept 22 at the Suntec City Convention Centre. Co-organised by the Singapore Productivity Centre (SPC) and the Singapore Retailers Association (SRA), the conference is Singapore’s key retail event for the latest retail trends and global best practices. With the theme of “Re-evolve Retail”, this year’s conference promises to inspire companies to achieve greater growth through international and local sharings, focusing on how retail businesses around the world have transformed to meet today’s challenges.

FOOD SERVICES PRODUCTIVITY CONFERENCE

The Food Services Productivity Conference 2015 is the hallmark event for the food services industry, to be held on Oct 30, 9am to 12pm, at One Farrer Hotel & Spa. With the theme of “Foodprint of the Future”, this year’s conference aims to provide insight into the future of Singapore’s food services industry and how to navigate this in the midst of tight manpower and rising costs. Participants will also hear from F&B players which have successfully adopted productive business formats and digital service internationally.

Please e-mail customerservice@sgpc.sg or call 6745-5833 for more information about both conferences, or visit <http://www.sgpc.sg/index.php/sric2015> or <http://www.sgpc.sg/index.php/fpc2015>

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