

Publication: ST Online

Date: 07 April 2020

Headline: F&B firms stay afloat with innovation and technology amid Covid-19

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With a ban on dining-in among the new "circuit breaker" measures taking effect, food outlets will be facing their biggest challenge yet as the coronavirus crisis rages on.

But Mr Muhammad Husain Mansoor, 33, is not about to throw in the towel.

While grateful for the latest relief measures unveiled in the Solidarity Budget on Monday (April 6), the chief executive of Al-Azhar Group is also aware that he must improve his business model to keep it sustainable during this difficult time.

He told The New Paper on Monday that his company is rushing out a mobile application to allow customers to make orders, which he hopes will be a game changer.

Mr Husain said he had this idea about six months ago, when Covid-19 was still unheard of, but the virus scourge has made the app a top priority.

He hopes to launch the app by next month, but in the meantime, customers can make orders on the Al-Azhar Facebook page from Monday.

Its website is also being revamped to cater to online orders.

"Previously, our customers could only phone in their orders or come to our outlets for takeaway. There were a lot of manual operations involved," Mr Husain said.

"But everything will soon be automatic. Customers can browse an online menu, pick their selections and make payment online."

Some of its 150 workers across three outlets will double as in-house food delivery riders.

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He said: "Customers who know some of my staff as waiters may soon see them riding bikes or driving vans and delivering food to their doorstep."

Mr Husain said this was one way the company could keep its workers gainfully employed.

"I want to avoid drastic measures like laying off workers. As a business, we have to be open-minded and adaptive.

"Without a doubt, the pandemic has taken a toll on us. But we are ready to fight, be resilient and stand in solidarity with our workers," he added.

Two other food establishments also told TNP that they see this crisis not just as a setback but also an opportunity to transform and revamp their business models by leveraging on technology.

Singaporean pastry chef Janice Wong, who owns 2am:dessertbar and 2am:lab, recently launched online store Bake at Home to give customers access to recipes, cake pre-mixes and baking ingredients such as popping candy.

Ms Wong told TNP: "In this time of crisis, we had to pivot our focus and message to our customers.

"Instead of selling, we are focused on giving. We encourage customers to stay at home, be safe and instead we will bring the Janice Wong experience to you at your home."

She projected at least a 30 per cent increase in online sales from its new enterprise.

Pan Pacific Hotels Group has also launched an additional e-shop for its Si Chuan Dou Hua Restaurant at Parkroyal on Beach Road, and will similarly launch a platform for its outlet at Kitchener Road soon.

The group said: "We have seen a steady take-up of online orders for all platforms. Pacific Marketplace has particularly been a favourite among regulars."

PAINFUL

Professor of Marketing Kapil Tuli of the Singapore Management University said the circuit breaker this month will be a painful experience for most F&B outlets, and he expects some casualties.

But he also agreed that this downtime could be an opportune time for firms to modify their business approach.

Mr Tuli, who is also director of the Retail Centre of Excellence at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at SMU, told TNP: "Transforming traditional business modes to go online is the right way to go and businesses which tap on this will do better than the others even after the crisis tides over, because by then, they will be able to tap on an omni-channel approach."

Announcing a \$5.1 billion Solidarity Budget on Monday, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said businesses will get additional wage support for local employees this month.

"I will raise the wage subsidy for all firms to 75 per cent of gross monthly wages, for the first \$4,600 of wages paid in April 2020," he said.

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Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister, said the first Jobs Support Scheme (JSS) payout will be brought forward to April, with some firms receiving the first tranche next week.

"I expect firms to make use of this JSS support to continue paying your workers and refrain from putting workers on no-pay leave during this period, or worse, retrenching them."

The monthly Foreign Worker Levy paid by firms will also be waived for April.

A spokesman for the Restaurant Association of Singapore (RAS) said it will push its community to use these support measures to keep as many jobs as possible.

The association, which has over 450 members representing close to 700 brands, said it encourages them to send their local staff for skills upgrading and training during this period.

"RAS thanks the Government for announcing prompt and additional help for F&B businesses and workers during these uncertain times," it said.

"To support our F&B businesses in cash flow, the enhanced JSS is significant and will make a difference to help businesses stay afloat and retain our staff."