

THEY WILL 'FREE UP RESTAURANT STAFF TO ENGAGE WITH CUSTOMERS'

Flying robot servers to raise the bar for Timbre

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SINGAPORE – Flying robot waiters will be delivering food and drink to diners at a Timbre Group restaurant from the end of next year, freeing up restaurant staff to better tend to other customer needs.

Timbre Group has yet to decide which of its five outlets — Timbre @ The Substation, Timbre @ The Arts House, Timbre @ Gillman, Switch or Barber Shop — will see the deployment of such robots, which are a world first. It hopes to eventually deploy them at all five outlets.

Unlike similar robot servers introduced elsewhere, these robots — developed by Infinium Robotics — are not piloted via remote control. Users only need enter a command on which table to serve and the robot will be able to do so without further input.

The robots, called Infinium-Serve, were showcased early last month at the launch of the inaugural National Productivity Month and come with a suite of sensors and stabilising technologies to avoid collisions and prevent spillages. Those used by Timbre Group will be able to lift loads of up to 2kg and have redundancies built-in in case of malfunction.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, Mr Edward Chia, managing director of Timbre Group, said the use of technology, such as its iPad menus, can enhance the “Timbre experience”.

“The Infinium-Serve will serve the food and drinks from our bar and kitchen directly to the customers. This will allow us to serve our customers

faster and, most importantly, it gives our staff more opportunity to engage and converse with customers. This creates an ideal situation, because we can now focus on building customer relationships,” said Mr Chia.

He stressed that the robots would not replace people — the group is presently understaffed. Instead, they will bring down the customer-to-staff ratio and improve the customer experience.

Infinium Robotics chief executive officer, Mr Woon Junyang, estimated the project cost for all five outlets to be a “low seven-figure sum”, but the final cost is subjected to final negotiations. Both firms are looking to apply for productivity-related government grants to help offset the costs of deployment.

When asked whether others have approached Infinium to set up something similar, Mr Woon confirmed that restaurant groups from China, Hong Kong, the United States and Europe have done so and that they are in talks.

A recent quarterly survey on customer satisfaction in Singapore conducted by Singapore Management University’s Institute of Service Excellence showed a 6.5 per cent decline to 65.8 points out of 100 in the food and beverage sector, compared with last year. The drop was partly attributed to the labour crunch Singapore is facing.

Mr Woon felt such robotic solutions would help alleviate the manpower shortage in Singapore and elsewhere. Freeing staff from the mundane task of serving food and drinks allows them to engage in higher-value tasks, such as getting feedback from customers or highlighting new menu items, he said.

“The new technology will result in an enhanced dining experience, which will eventually lead to increased sales and revenue for the restaurants.”

Mr Woon Junyang
CEO OF INFINIUM
ROBOTICS, WHICH
DEVELOPED THE ROBOTS