

Some businesses here are using quirky freebies and add-ons to attract customers, never mind that they aren't related to the company's core offerings. Benita Aw Yeong checks out two of them.



Drink up while you spiff up

This salon's proposition is simple: Spend on hair and nails, and we throw in a free glass of wine.

Nestled along a row of ground-level shops on Rodyk Street – off River Valley and Clarke Quay – is Blow+Bar.

The first thing you notice is a bar top in a fiery shade of red, which takes the place of traditional tables.

Although it is only six months old, business has been brisk.

Owners Ashley Soh and Diana Goh believe offering free booze is an intriguing concept that has given it an edge.

"We have people standing outside the place, looking at the booze, asking if the place was a salon or a bar."

"They are always excited when we tell them we serve wine, especially because we're located along the Singapore River," says Madam Soh, 30.

Blow-outs – getting your hair washed, scalp massaged and tresses styled – are a signature offering.

The service starts at \$35 and goes up to \$48, depending on hair length.

The place is also regularly booked for hen parties and bachelorette get-togethers, adds Miss Goh, also 30.

Offering free wine is sustainable since not every customer drinks.

"If it's a weekday morning, they typically opt for coffee or orange juice," explains Madam Soh.

So has anyone got completely sloshed while getting dolled up?

Certainly not, says Madam Soh, since they offer only one glass of wine.

"If the customer asks for more, we offer them a glass of water."

She is quick to clarify that extra wine may be served on a case-by-case basis – for example, if the customer is spending significant time and dough.

"On the weekends, customers don't think twice about gulping down alcohol as early as 10am, when we open."

"After all, weekends are about letting your hair down, right?" says Madam Soh with a chuckle.

Picking the right type of wine to serve was a challenge, she adds.

"We needed something which was good quality, easy to drink and something that would satisfy the tastebuds of both the discerning drinker as well as the amateur," she says.

In the end, they settled on Sauvignon Blanc for white wine and Merlot for red, both of which they get from a local supplier.



"We have a French gentleman who comes by for a haircut once every two weeks. We suspect it might be something to do with the wine," Madam Soh says with a grin.

Customers like Ms Jacqueline Nam, a Korean design brand manager who has been living here for the past five years, appreciate the complimentary alcohol.

"At Blow+Bar, I spend between \$40 to \$100 each time, depending on whether I get only my hair done or the nails as well."

"I used to have membership at another salon where I would spend \$100 just on nails alone," she says.

DRINK UP: Co-owner Ashley Soh pampering the tresses of customer Ms Lam Yi Lee, who is enjoying a glass of red wine on the house.

TNP PICTURE: JEREMY LONG

Care for a manicure before your meal?

You could say that at hotpot restaurant Hai Di Lao, food is an afterthought.

After all, it is a tiny nail parlour enclosed by glass walls which greets customers before they even get their first taste of soup.

A fresh coat of paint for your nails is one of a bevy of entertainment options for customers who wait for a spot at this Sichuan hotpot chain, which set up its first local outlet in October last year.

"On Friday evenings and weekends, customers may need to wait about an hour or more for a spot because the process of enjoying hotpot is all about taking time," says the restaurant's regional general manager, Mr Wang Jin Ping.

In Mandarin, Hai Di Lao means trawling the bottom of the sea.

One of the 80 service staff employed by Hai Di Lao waits in eager anticipation to soak your spectacles in an ultrasonic machine meant for cleaning, before giving it a good polish by hand. Others offer new screenguards for your mobile phones.

There's even something for the children. Fold 30 origami paper cranes, or tinker with a Rubik's cube successfully and enjoy a side dish on the house.

Popcorn and banana chips, in addition to slices of watermelon, are offered on a free-flow basis.

It's hard to get frustrated by the wait, because you are simply too distracted by the host of sideline activities.

"It's all about creating an enjoyable, relaxing environment for our customers," says Jiangxi native Mr Wang, who has worked for the company for the past six years.

No detail is small enough. A notice on the back of a woman's bathroom cubicles states that should you be caught without necessary supplies during that time of the month, service staff are on hand to offer you sanitary napkins.

"I think this type of service blows people away, because Singaporeans are not really used to this kind of attention," says Ms Loh Supei, 24, who has been to the restaurant twice. Ms Loh works in the media.

Another customer, Ms Cecilia Wee, says: "If you're not expecting tip-top service comparable to that offered by a beauty spa, then the manicure at Hai Di Lao is okay."

Adds the 30-year-old business manager: "I only wish there were more colours to choose from, but for something that is free, we shouldn't be complaining."

It is not uncommon for waiters at the restaurant to double up as deliverymen, such as when husbands decide to surprise their wives with a spontane-



ous bouquet of flowers, says Mr Wang.

While there are many reasons why businesses like Hai Di Lao offer these seemingly non-core value-added services, the main motivation is usually the desire to differentiate, says assistant professor at Singapore Management University Marcus Lee.

"They are trying to stand out from their competitors in an attempt to stave off the very real possibility of having to compete on price if their industry was commoditised," he explains.

Commoditisation refers to a process where goods and services characterised by certain attributes become sim-

HOT SPOT? Hai Di Lao offers manicures to waiting customers.

TNP PICTURES: CHOO CHWEE HUA

WHILE YOU WAIT: Service staff at Hai Di Lao cleaning a customer's spectacles.

ple, undifferentiated commodities.

Still, the restaurant's business model is one that has worked for the 19-year-old chain, which has about 90 outlets all over mainland China.

Each outlet offers complimentary freebies and sideline activities, although the range differs.

"In China, we offer shoe-shining services, but in Singapore, it's so clean and people are often in slippers or sandals. So we don't have a dedicated area for that," says Mr Wang, who is quick to clarify that the service is available should customers request for it.

But lest you fall hook, line and sinker for such marketing ploys, think twice, urges Prof Lee.

"Remember nothing is for free. Something given

on a complimentary basis does not mean you, the consumer, will not eventually pay for it," says the marketing professor.

To offer the freebies, businesses often increase the price of core services across all customers, he explains.

Customers at Hai Di Lao order grub on an ala carte basis, with most spending about \$40 per head, says Mr Wang.

In contrast, buffet-style dining at a typical steamboat outlet might set you back about \$20 to \$30 per head.

So just how sustainable is a marketing strategy like Hai Di Lao's?

It all depends on whether there are enough customers who value such services and are willing to pay more for them, says Prof Lee.