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letters@thechronicle.com.au
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Alienating dine-in customers

GEORGE HELON

OKAY, so we have to accept COVID-19 has radically changed how we dine-in at restaurants and order takeaway meals, but must we contentedly accept poor service from hospitality staff who are too preoccupied and ignoring us as they prepare contactless delivery orders en-masse?

Three counters open, five staff running about, yet no one cares for the traditional customer standing right in front of them.

Dining-in at fast food establishments today is fast becoming a frustrating chore and a source of customer annoyance, anger and disdain as retailers and franchisees embrace new trading models and food delivery platforms like UberEats, Menulog, Yelp and EatNow at the expense of their traditional customer base.

Contactless delivery is the new catchcry and flavour of the day.

Once upon a time, when people wanted to eat they had to run all over the countryside, hunt and trap for food, prepare it and skilfully cook it (if they could start a fire), food was pretty much bland at best.

But hunting and gathering took too much physical effort and time – all too much risk, thought, skill and exercise was required just to survive.

People were tribal and nomadic, they had to rely on others for their subsistence, to use their brains and physically exert themselves.

Many people went without food for days and indeed many starved and died between meals. It was every man for himself.

Along came open-air feudal and medieval market bazaars where street foods abounded.

All of a sudden, you only had to travel a short distance to eat, barter and trade for whatever culinary foodstuffs and ingredients you wanted to prepare even the heartiest of feasts;



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food could be sensationally spiced to whet the appetite of even the fussiest of eaters.

But even though people had settled into stable societies they got mentally challenged and exhausted just looking at all of the choices and combinations before them.

Spicing-up a meal was really a case of hit-and-miss – folks still had to use their brains, more so their senses, and physically apply themselves to put a meal on the table.

Cooking a family meal was a tedious and messy business, but families sat and ate together, people were mostly fit and healthy thanks to their shopping excursions and hearty eating.

Fast forward a few centuries, and open-air market stalls soon evolved into neighbourhood corner and convenience stores where cash could buy you a range of everyday essential items including groceries, bread, milk, beverages, personal hygiene goods, confectionery, snack foods, newspapers, magazines, stationery, tobacco products, convenient TV dinners to go, takeaway meals like fish and chips and succulent hamburgers, even a roast chook.

Albeit it was the dawn of the fast-

food binge era to come, there was still fun in preparing food at home where we sat around the dining table without the distraction of any mobile electronic device – it was a family affair.

Back in those days, you sort of looked forward each week to the smiling lass at the corner shop who would cook your favourite burger.

Service was fast, efficient and with a smile, the conversation was great, the fish and chips were to die for and personal service reigned supreme.

But corner stores soon became well known for holding smaller amounts of stock and charging far in excess of retail prices; convenience came at a high price.

Skip ahead a few decades, and we had a gastronomic explosion of formal and fine-dining restaurants, inexpensive local cafeterias, eateries, takeaway diners and buffet bistros which afforded convenience and the opportunity for people to eat out and enjoy the pleasures of someone else cooking for them.

But people started to get idle and lazy, the family as a unit was soon engulfed by self-entitled individuality and selfish culinary desires where everyone ate what they wanted, on the run, in isolation, on their own – the world on the cusp of an obesity crisis with a catastrophic health epidemic to boot: diabetes, heart disease, stroke, depression and cancer.

Although eating out was a convenience it gobbled-up more than just your money.

Loyal customers who returned regularly were a valuable commodity and asset; service was upfront, personal and with a smile, food was still healthy for you and generally of a high standard.

Then supermarkets emerged and promised lower prices and an almost infinite array of foodstuffs, delights and dinners (frozen, pre-cooked, pre-prepared, pre-packaged, or otherwise), as well as non-food items such as household, hardware and clothing

items.

But people soon tired at the very thought of having to waste time travelling to satellite locations where public amenities and food stalls were generally few and far between, or not available at all.

How to satisfy shoppers and diners – a conundrum. Drum roll ...

At that juncture along came retail shopping centres where major supermarkets or department stores would act as anchor tenants intending to attract a significant cross section of the shopping public to the centre.

But often shoppers become frustrated, stressed, annoyed, and angry at having to traipse – for what seems an eternity – from one end of the world to the other, parking like sardines in a can, navigating the labyrinth of aisles, standing in queues, excessive noise, the screaming kids, coming back to a damaged car.

Shoppers have enjoyed the pleasures and experienced the wonders of window shopping over the years, catching-up with people, having a cake, coffee and a meal with family, friends and acquaintances at selected eateries – the stocktake sales, the exercise.

But in luring more people to shopping centres, restaurant, franchisee and hospitality retailers have been unable to cope with the demand for increased menu choices (carnivore, vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, lactose-free, kosher, halal, etc.), faster cooking times, preparation, service and reasonably priced meals and beverages – keeping abreast with unrealistic customer expectations.

Enter global fast food franchises like KFC, Subway, Red Rooster, McDonald's, Wendy's and Donut King which soon devoured traditional local takeaway diners with their promises of convenience, a quickly prepared and tasty feed for the whole family at a reasonable price.

The reality is, fast foods are often high in saturated fat, calories and salt,

making for a world of grossly overweight and slothful people binging on comfort foods and suffering obesity, poor nutrition and prone to insulin resistance and diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, depression and cancer because they are more interested in exercising their mouths than their feet.

Now, thanks to COVID-19 we have a proliferation of food delivery apps which are catering to the slothful eating habits of Generation Z who would rather scroll through their smartphones to order food from their favourite restaurant than leave the confines of their boudoirs because they "are forced to stay at home."

COVID-19 has almost alienated cash as a form of legal tender because we are "encouraged" to embrace e-commerce, shop online, avail ourselves of bank transfers, use EFTPOS and make in-app purchases.

Menuloggers, Yelpers, UberEaters and their like are a new breed of culinary customers who are worshipped by some fast food restaurateurs and franchisees as some sort of hungry fiscal saints.

Now many franchisees and restaurant owners must be either naive or oblivious to think that this new breed of customers are it for the long-haul.

Convenience and price are one thing, but customer presence in-store shows brand loyalty, whereas contactless delivery customers are just that – not contacting or interacting with restaurants and franchises.

COVID-19 might just be a gastronomic hiccup, but in reality it is the death knell for many traditional dining establishments and restaurants.

But as history has proven time-and-again with all fads and booms in the market, crashes will happen; not if – when?

Those fast food restaurants and franchisees who have alienated and poisoned their traditional customer base will struggle to win them back.



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