

Genki Sushi and the Kousoku Innovation—Still a Gimmick or a Game Changer?



Source: Unsplash (2019)

Background

The word ‘Gimmick’ refers to something that is used to attract people’s attention or interest (Cambridge University, n.d.). For many years, businesses across industries have come up with creative ways to make gimmicks to attract customers, including publicity stunts or adding unique elements to their products (Rachmad, 2024).

As one of the largest sushi restaurant chains in Asia, Genki Sushi introduced the concept of “Kousoku” (高速) from Japan to Hong Kong in 2015 (Genki Sushi, n.d.). Inspired by the Japanese Shinkansen (新幹線), the Kousoku system allows a bullet train-looking tray to operate on a fully automated track, and delivers sushi dishes straight from the kitchen to the customers’ table (Tan, 2018). At that time, Genki Sushi pioneered the whole industry by being the first sushi chain to adopt a fully automated operation model with a three-tier Kousoku express delivery system (Genki Sushi, n.d.). Together with the self-ordering system through iPad or mobile devices, Genki Sushi was able to streamline and speed up their service, as well as offering an unprecedented innovative dining experience to the customers (Genki Sushi, n.d.). Since then, “Kousoku” quickly became signature of Genki Sushi as many flocked to the restaurant to experience the latest addition to the store when it was first introduced.

Challenges

Nearly a decade after its debut, the Kousoku system is no longer the novelty it once was. Since its launch, many competitors have replicated similar technologies, diminishing Genki Sushi’s first-mover advantage. As a result, the uniqueness of the concept has faded, and customers are less impressed over time.

Moreover, the fully automated service model—including self-ordering—can be challenging for elderly customers or those less comfortable with technology. The brand has also faced criticism over inconsistent food quality and hygiene issues. These concerns have prompted some to suggest that the restaurant should prioritize improving food and service quality, rather than focusing solely on operational speed and technological novelty.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits and potential drawbacks of introducing fully automated systems like the “Kousoku” express delivery system in Genki Sushi?
2. How can the restaurant address operational challenges like customers’ technological incompetence and inconsistent quality levels when adopting automated service?
3. What other technologies or innovations can Genki Sushi adopt to further differentiate itself from competitors?
4. How can Genki Sushi safeguard its innovations from imitation and maintain a competitive edge when launching new technologies or business models in the future?

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