

Just a Trim...

Founded in 1995, haircut specialty store QB House achieved rapid growth with a unique service that offered “ten minutes, 1,000 yen, just a haircut.” Having set itself the goal of becoming an “international service company,” QB House is also actively working to expand overseas. Toshio Matsubara reports.

At most barbershops in Japan, as well as a haircut one can enjoy services such as shampoos, shaves and massages. Unless you want your hair permed, the cost ranges between three and five thousand yen, and takes anywhere from thirty minutes to around an hour.

It was QB House, operated by QB Net Co., that defied this common wisdom. The first QB House location opened in 1996 in Tokyo. What made it special was the thorough streamlining of its workflow. For example, the introduction of ticket-vending machines eliminated the need for a cash register, and rather than using water to shampoo customers' hair, a machine known as an “air washer” was used to suck up stray hairs. As a result, QB House achieved what no other barbershop could by offering short ten-

minute haircuts at the low price of 1,000 yen.

Basically, all QB House locations are small stores with three to four seats. As of January 2012, they have grown to number 435 locations nationwide.

Further, in 2000—its fifth year of operation—QB Net began preparations to expand overseas, opening its first overseas store in Singapore in 2002.

“We have little awareness of ‘overseas,’” says QB Net President Yasuo Kitano. “It was as a result of looking for attractive ‘cities’ as markets that we inevitably turned our attention overseas.”

The company first chose Singapore because of its high population density, improved standard of living following economic growth, and the various types of support offered to overseas companies by the government.

Since the same drastic streamlining of workflow has been employed at these stores, costs have been kept down to a third of the regular price of a haircut in these locales, with haircuts available for 10 Singapore dollars and 50 Hong Kong dollars, respectively. The stores have attracted attention not only for their characteristic low price and fast service but also for the high-quality haircuts one can receive and cleanliness, their location in stations and shopping malls,



A branch of QB House in Hong Kong. About 150 customers come here a day.

which is something these markets have never seen before. As a result, the number of stores has grown steadily, presently numbering twenty-nine in Singapore and thirty-three in Hong Kong. Popular for giving “stylish haircuts even in a short time,” its overseas locations also attract more female customers than in Japan.

QB House has invested the most in building an IT-based information management system. For instance, at its head office and overseas subsidiaries, the status of usage across all stores and seats can now be checked in real-time. The utilization rate of a seat is a way to express the technique of the “stylist” (what QB House calls its hairdressers) assigned to that seat in numerical terms. Superior hair-cutting skills are a given, but unless stylists are able to actually perform haircuts quickly, it is not viable as a business. By recording the time taken for each haircut numerically, stylists can assess the quality and performance of their own work objectively.

Stylist training is conducted on an ongoing basis, and the staff employed overseas such as area managers and store managers visit Japan to take part in intensive training that lasts for around one week.

“Rather than having the head office here in Japan decide everything, we delegate decision-making authority to the local subsidiaries. This nurtures a sense of ownership and means they resolve various local problems in a speedy fashion,” says Kitano. By handing over responsibility, store managers in particular receive a boost in morale, and staff’s attitude to customers and their haircutting skills improve in a short time, he says.



QB Shell units (here in Singapore) are simple single-seat stores that can be set up in a matter of hours. The units are typically set up on a temporary basis in open spaces at locations such as airports and shopping malls. Customers pay for their cut at a vending machine, then wait their turn on the white stools provided.

Each year, a meeting of store managers is held in Tokyo. Around 400 store managers from Japan and overseas gather to present the management expertise of highly successful stores and share information. Initiatives such as these have paid off to the extent that today there are twelve overseas stores in the top-twenty ranking of per-seat haircuts performed.

“The satisfaction in working in QB House is the consistent increment of self-value in haircut skills via customer service and self-practice. With over 1.1 million customers visiting QB House per year in Singapore, this environment is full of challenges in fulfilling customers’ expectations,” says Elva Chung, the Singapore area manager.

“Being able to make a good impression just because you’re a Japanese company never lasts long. Constant effort and improvement is essential to expand the customer base,” says Kitano. HD

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