

INVESTING IN SERVICE

Andre Huber of Huber's Butchery looks at how family values have formed a cornerstone of their service vision.

Andre Huber is the youngest co-founder of family-run Huber's Butchery, a premium butchery and bistro nestled in the lush Dempsey Hill. Founded in 2008 with his older brother, Ryan, and his father, Ernst, Huber's Butchery has built its name on Ernst's experience of over 50 years in hospitality and F&B. On top of serving customers at their Dempsey store, Huber's also operates a food service arm that currently caters to about 1,000 hotels and restaurants in Singapore.

Andre describes Huber's Butchery as a family-run outfit — a company that's powered by 140 team members who embody the Huber family spirit. While the structure sounds ambitious, there is a clear culture of reverence and camaraderie that reveals itself in our morning together. Wherever we go, Andre acknowledges each staff member by name. They, in turn, are gracious to his needs — one even pulls up a chair for Andre's briefcase when he notices it on the floor.

At Huber's, building a family isn't just about implementing systems; it's about putting values to everyday practice. Says Andre, "There's no real science behind it, I guess. I think it's the way we treat all the staff — how we greet them, how we're not shy to help them. They see how we interact with one another as a family. We bring our families and kids here, and we teach them to greet everyone and remember their names. We always tell each other to behave like gentlemen. To behave like we would in a family."

Andre, was joining your father in business something you've always wanted to do? Not at all. My brother studied automotive engineering and was supposed to go to Germany to work, but the visa application took so long he started working with my dad.

I did a more general business degree because I had always wanted to set up my own business. My dad had always encouraged us to move to Australia because he wanted a better quality of life for us, so I went overseas and enjoyed it. After a few years, I was looking for business opportunities, but it wasn't easy as an Asian to do something there without the network. I saw my brother come into the business and I thought to come back to join him. My dad had built something so successful. Why waste it?

Has your service approach changed as the company has grown? Not really. Huber's service vision has always been to provide a personable and friendly service to all customers regardless of their background, much like how you treat each other in a family. Treating everyone fairly is something my dad instilled from the beginning. We don't look at customers thinking, *are they rich or are they just a helper?* We treat everyone the same, and that goes for how staff treat each other too.

Delivering good service used to be taught in-house through on-the-job training. Now we're growing





at a pace where you have to set up systems and structures, so we hired a service consultant to formalise our processes and document our service philosophy. This makes service delivery more consistent and also gives staff a better understanding of what is expected.

We've always felt that our service has to match our product quality, so we've always looked for ways to improve. We now have handbooks and pocket-sized cards that staff keep with them at work. We conduct customer satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping, and we take most feedback seriously. We go through feedback from Facebook, TripAdvisor, surveys, and emails with our employees. Sometimes we bring up examples on our weekly debrief so everyone can learn from it.

Huber's is also known for its knowledgeable staff. Our kind of business is more service and knowledge-led: you can buy a good quality product from us and it can turn out very bad if you don't know how to cook it well, so it's important customers are educated.

Staff education is key to customer education. We try to find people with cooking knowledge first, and from there we teach them the butchery skills. We impart knowledge through product training sessions and in-house briefings. We also test the butchers in small groups by asking them questions like "where do I find the mayonnaise?" Our butchers also need to know these answers because these are questions that customers often ask.

Every fortnight, we send out a video to all employees on a product we have, like a particular

pasta that we sell and what's good about it. Every other fortnight, we send out a short video on service training, like how to tackle a certain problem, for example.

Service is such a big part of Huber's DNA. How have you translated that online? My father was very against selling online. He always felt that people would want to see the freshness of the meat before buying it, but I felt that once your brand is strong enough, people buy online because of convenience and trust.

With online platforms, you tend to lose that service component, that human interaction. I thought for a long time of how to replace that. We started with a platform that is, of course, easy to navigate and shop over and over again. We don't have a butcher there for customers to direct questions to, so we created a *meathesaurus* section that has loads of information on meat, meat cuts, and how to best handle, store, and cook our meats. We also have a recipe section where we share tried and tested recipes categorised by the type of meat.

We then created a YouTube channel where customers can watch videos on alternative steak cuts and learn how to sharpen knives, how to cook meat etc. These videos tie in very well with our online service delivery because it gives a face to the brand.

Most recently, we added a new section to the website – Ask the Experts. We know customers can have burning questions about butchering or cooking, so what we've done is to create a panel of experts within their respective cuisines to help answer questions. If the question isn't very private, the answer is then shared publicly on our forum for others to read and hopefully learn from.

How do you keep your team committed to Huber's vision? We have our service trainings and structures. For example, I regularly meet with teams to listen to issues and align our thinking and actions. Employee salaries have been increasing so

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I believe that keeps them happy and motivated. We also have loyalty programmes to reward long service and an appraisal system where good workers receive a bigger share of the bonus payout.

Of course, we instill a strong family culture here which makes for a warm and happy working environment. It's just about treating people well, right down to the dishwasher and cleaner. When staff see how the bosses treat people, they're appreciative and treat you and each other nicely. It rubs off on everyone. ♦