

## **Retaining That Human Touch In Retail**

*The Straits Times Forum Online Story (May 24, 2010)*

I REFER to the May 15 report ("Neighbourhood shops struggling to survive") on how the proliferation of major convenience stores in heartland neighbourhoods has posed significant threats to smaller provision shops.

Even though economically, it is definitely logical for larger, well-equipped corporations to out-wrestle their smaller counterparts, the nostalgia and cultural significance tagged to the provision shops - affectionately known as "mama" shops - makes it an unfortunate outcome.

My grandfather used to operate a small provision shop in Balestier and while the scale of operations was considerably limited, the front of the shop was a constant hubbub of activity. Residents from the surrounding neighbourhood gathered around to converse about their daily happenings as they purchased household items and various necessities.

Throughout my adolescence, I remember fondly serving an assortment of snacks and drinks after school to the men who gathered around the small tables to chat and joke. In essence, the provision shop was more than a mere store selling goods and offering services; like the wet markets, it was a venue of affection, friendship and wondrous connection.

The "human touch" offered by these smaller shops - in the form of personalised service, familiarity of the staff and the attention to detail - remain inimitable for the large grocery chains. Let us not forget their historical and traditional importance as well.

It is possible and feasible to harmonise the advantages of the large convenience chains with the positives of the smaller provision shops. Rather than entirely replacing the existing stores, PSC Corporation's iEcon chain has offered smaller players the possibility of maintaining the business while enhancing the relevant standards and quality. This provides the shop owner the same flexibility in management and staff employment, and continues the precious "human touch" in sales and interaction.

Other than such cooperative schemes, individual provision stores can band together at a regional level to make bulk purchases and negotiate as a group so as to capitalise on available economies of scale.

The wheels of development must turn. Yet, wherever possible, let us progress without losing too much of our valuable heritage and memories.