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Florence TAY

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Unpacking a Sustainable Concept

Florence Tay, Co-Founder of UnPackt, breaks down how community building and education can lead to a more enduring zero-waste journey.



UnPackt, a zero-waste grocery store in a sleepy residential neighbourhood, provides an alternative form of consumption to the plastic-laden shopping at conventional supermarkets. In here, products are kept in differently sized containers to keep fresh for the week, and customers bring their own containers from home to buy only what they need. The expanding range includes everything from dried food to liquid detergent alongside a selection of tools that aids the zero-waste lifestyle — stainless steel straws, collapsible containers, and even menstrual cups.

Walk into UnPackt and you might be surprised at how laidback and spacious the place feels. While the walls are lined with shelves of containers, the rest of the space is empty save for the heart of the room — a single communal table that invariably draws gatherings both big and small.

Florence Tay, Co-Founder of UnPackt, shares more with us about building an engaged community and a better future for our children by way of a welcoming space and homely service.

Florence, what led you to start UnPackt?

I came across a viral video of people bringing their own containers when they shop. I thought that was very practical because at the end of the day, we only consume the contents in the packaging and not the packaging itself. Coming from a business background, I know consumers pay for the cost of packaging, so it's not practical when we don't consume it.

I shared the video with my co-founder, Jeff, who lives alone and often cannot finish the prepackaged amounts sold in supermarkets. He brought up that package-free shopping is practical especially for smaller families or people who live alone. We researched more about the concept and came across the term "zero-waste" — we both liked that it's a growing movement not just about environmental issues but also about building community awareness.

Why is community important to you?

We feel people can have a more lasting zero-waste journey if they do it with their friends and family. That's why we encourage parents to bring in their kids. As a mother myself, I know that parents become paranoid in cramped areas because they're worried their kids will break something. That's why we've kept the environment so spacious — because we like that kids are coming in and learning to buy only what they need.



We actually have kids now who ask their parents to bring them here on weekends so that they can buy their favourite snacks. Parents are also happy because they can then ration their kids' snacks — the kids have their own containers and can buy anything they want for the week so long as it fits inside.

Since zero-waste grocery shopping may be unfamiliar to many shoppers, how do you work on educating your customers and building that community awareness?

A big difference to how people approach the space, I feel, has to do with the layout. When you don't feel cramped, you don't feel the urge to quickly finish shopping and rush out of the door. You'll feel like you can shop at your own pace, look around, ask questions. It's a specialty shopping experience.

We have a sign where we break down the steps on how to shop package-free. One

challenge with package-free shopping is keeping the food fresh — Singapore is very humid and shoppers like to open containers to look inside, which can affect freshness. We downsized the containers to store smaller portions and ensured each container has a large, clear panel for shoppers to see inside. We also put up signs around the stations and phrased our messages more positively: "I can only remain fresh if you open me when you intend to purchase", for example, instead of "do not open".

We also intentionally placed a common table in the area so shoppers can chat with each other over the table. For example, I had a shopper who happened to be looking for sugar to make kombucha, and there was another lady who in the shop talking about getting package-free kombucha. I connected them with each other and they began to share ideas on how to make kombucha. That's what we want in UnPackt — for our shoppers to build a community together.

I personally try to be in the store because I like connecting our customers this way. We also host talks in our shop and work with schools on teaching children about the unpackaged shopping experience. We teach them about the 5Rs — refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot — instead of the 3Rs traditionally taught in textbooks.





What's your service philosophy?

Well, we started with a more conservative product selection, but we also have a notebook at the counter where we ask customers for feedback on what they're looking for. This system allows us to better understand what shoppers want to buy before we procure the products. In this way, we reduce food wastage, listen to our shoppers, and are able to show suppliers the demand for package-free goods and negotiate bulk purchases.

How have you applied service practices that you've encountered elsewhere at UnPackt?

Service excellence, to me, means taking in customers' feedback to provide better products, better quality, and better service. We use technology to track our customers' shopping history — each time they buy, we'll key in how much they've purchased so we can advise them on how much they need next time. For instance, we had a customer who came back and told us the oats she bought only lasted her two weeks and she would prefer to make a monthly trip instead. We were then able to search

the database for her records to advise her accordingly.

I've been in the retail industry since I was 10 years old, so I guess I've learned quite a fair bit. One of my main takeaways is that people like personalised service. For example, when I used to waitress at conferences, I remembered that a particular attendee would take coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon. When I served him his tea, I would offer it by saying, "Would you like tea? Two cubes of sugar."

That's what we try to replicate at UnPackt — we work to understand our customers so we can guide them and share a friendship instead of just a business transaction. Because of this, we've made a lot of friends — some of my shoppers even have my phone number. Sometimes they'll text me to ask if we have a particular item. Or they'll just say, "I'll be dropping by tomorrow. Are you in?" 📞

“We both liked that it's a growing movement not just about environmental issues but also about building community awareness.”