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Working Life, Money

Inking deals at 'power coffee breaks'

Some firms hold discussions, meet clients or build rapport among staff at coffee outlets

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IF COFFEE be the lifeblood of businesses, drink on. Judging by the sheer number of coffee places sprouting up in office districts, there is a symbiotic relationship between such outlets and workplaces.

Take Ms Stefanie Yuen Thio, joint managing director of TSMP Law Corporation, who sometimes uses the simple coffee break for what she terms a "high-powered deal discussion coffee".

"(These are) often used for preliminary discussions before a deal starts, to hammer out broad structures, flag important points or negotiate certain terms, such as fees," she said. But these should take place under very specific and controlled conditions.

"(We do it) only if we have a private table at off-peak times," she said. "We always use code names for the clients and the deal, and many (preliminary agreements) have been finalised by a gentlemen's agreement over a latte, and with the deal structure drawn out on a paper napkin."

She even has projects named after the cafes where they were first mooted: "Project Six" and "Project Burke".

For recruiting agency GMP Group, these coffee sessions can be an important part of its business. "We do meet prospective candidates over coffee. Most people we meet are not intending to move from their current employers; this is a less intrusive way to convince them to reconsider their present positions," said Mr Josh Goh, its assistant director of corporate services.

"Sometimes, candidates do not wish to be seen in a recruitment or executive search agency because they don't want their current employers to find out that they are exploring external opportunities," he said, adding that the firm has sealed some deals over coffee.

For Norwegian bank DnB Nor investment banker Joachim Jaeger Skorge, however, relationship building at the Starbucks outlet in his Temasek Tower office building is appropriate, but hard-nosed business is not. "No, I don't seal deals over coffee, not at Starbucks," he said.

Most people may ink their business agreements in a conference room, but many find that coffee with clients is crucial to building the rapport that helps both parties come to that agreement.

Mr Ong Wei Ping, executive director of environmental engineering solutions company IEQ Global, has long been in the field of sales and marketing, and finds that a cup of coffee is the perfect lubricant for building client rapport and networking.

"It's much easier to get a client down for coffee because it takes a lot less time," he said. "And unlike a meal, it's just drinks, so there's no problem with food preferences. In a restaurant, there are a lot of formalities - you wait for your tea to be poured, forks and spoons to be brought - that make people less at ease," he added.

While a nice hot coffee does wonders for business relationships among clients, things are just as prosperous on the other side of the counter.

The steady stream of customers every morning, lunchtime and evening keeps store managers satisfied.

Killiney Kopitiam and San Francisco Coffee at Millenia Walk are strategically located near Millenia Tower, to take advantage of this relationship. About 90 per cent of Killiney's customers are from offices in the vicinity.

"All our customers are repeat customers," said Killiney's managing director, Ms Anita Khubchandani. "Some even visit us a few times within a day."

Strong bonds can be formed when colleagues chat over sips of coffee in a casual environment far removed from the austerity of the office.

The friendly, non-threatening setting also presents an opportunity for superiors "to lay down the law to a subordinate and yet come across as not such a bad guy", quipped Ms Thio.

But there are also those who steer clear of the tentacles of social coffee, like Deloitte & Touche tax partner Sum Yee Loong, who makes his own coffee - Nescafe instant - in the office pantry every morning. "I'm a practical person. To get a cup of coffee downstairs at Starbucks costs me \$7 - with that I can buy one bottle of Nescafe instant coffee that lasts me for two weeks," he said. "But I must have my caffeine."

What about establishing rapport with colleagues? "I usually have lunch or drinks with them. After two beers, we begin to be more light-hearted - that's more fun," he added.

And coffee is kryptonite to Mr Timothy Peach, executive director of hedge fund Man Investments, who steers clear of anything that tastes remotely like coffee - even coffee cake. But this does not exclude him from the coffee break that clients or colleagues sometimes invite him to at the Starbucks at OCBC Centre.

"I have a cup of tea instead - green tea, even peppermint tea," he said.

Yet the gravity of the coffee break - or tea break in his case - is not lost on this Englishman: "The value in it, really, is that it's a semi-social meeting; you get more colour, and learn more about how the business works."

Mr Phil Ho, co-founder of Highlander Coffee, maintains that coffee is fast catching on as a beverage of choice.

"Nowadays, when people say 'tea time', what they actually mean is 'coffee time'," he joked. And besides keeping you from nodding off at work, coffee has served to
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minds of artists and entrepreneurs through the ages.

"Famous musicians like Mozart; they come from Austria, a coffee-drinking country. They wrote their pieces sitting in coffee houses. In Silicon Valley, there are many coffee shops where people sit down and brainstorm over a cup of coffee," said Mr Ho.