Next time, you won't be just staring at empty machines

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With the long, hot summer around the corner, it couldn't be more frustrating, sometimes, when you peep into a vending machine looking for your favorite drink, only to find it almost empty.  
That anomaly can now be addressed with the raging smart technology penetrating vast sectors of our daily lives.  
Gritus, a Hong Kong startup that makes and operates smart vending machines, may have the answer — providing machines which can warn companies that supplies have run out, or are fast running out, so that they can be quickly restocked.  
Co-founder Hanley Li, who started Gritus along with several friends early last year, is no stranger when it comes to operating traditional vending machines.  
"The technology of the traditional vending machines is actually very old, as we need to personally get to them to find out if any product on offer has been sold out. And, sometimes, we may find the machine had not sold anything at all, or that some items had run out of stock for nearly a week," Li tells China Daily.  
Such inconvenience inspired him to launch Gritus, developing smart vending machines with large touch screens that allow consumers to choose what they want with just a mild touch. Their choice, as well as how many snacks and beverages are still left in the machine, will be recorded and the data will be sent to the company concerned instantly.  
"So, we'll know which particular machine had sold how many products, which product is low in stock in a particular area, and we can arrange to replenish the machines accordingly," says Li.  
Gritus can also offer special discounts for certain products to lure consumers to buy them instead of those that are low in stock.  
Apart from making it much easier for the company to operate these smart vending machines, the machines can also interact with consumers to enhance their shopping experience by getting them to answer a few light questions in order to obtain a special discount for a certain product, or, they can watch a few seconds of advertisement videos to get a discount.  
According to Li, they have so far installed about 100 smart vending machines across Hong Kong, and college students are especially interested in answering questions in order to get bargains.  
The smart vending machine does not restrict itself to just selling snacks and beverages. It also offers small toys and accessories.  
"We want to cooperate with more brands as they represent stable sources for our company," says Li.  
Just like traditional vending machines, consumers can make a purchase by using the Octopus card, and soon, consumers, particularly those from the Chinese mainland, will be able to use WeChat Pay or Alipay to make purchases.  
Despite a rather small staff strength of some 20 employees, Gritus had managed to rake in more than HK$10 million revenue in its first year of operation, enabling it to break even.  
Li says they plan to set up between 800 and 1,000 smart vending machines across Hong Kong by the end of this year.  
"Our factory is on the Chinese mainland, and this helps us to expand there, where new retail and unmanned supermarkets are becoming all the rage. We believe the demand for smart vending machines will be strong on the mainland."  
Born in the 1980s and a graduate of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2011, majoring in mechanical engineering and business administration, Li had always dreamed of starting his own business. As the first step, he had set up an advertising company before getting Gritus off the ground.  
He believes Hong Kong is a good place for young people to start a business, as it's an international city and the people are very open minded and often willing to try out new things.  
Li reckons that young people in Hong Kong may need some extra courage to step out of their comfort zone, with so many large enterprises in the city making abundant job offers.  
"Most of my college classmates are already married and are now holding mid-level management jobs in various companies," says Li, stressing that young people must have the resolve if they want to start something on their own.  
His advice is: Don't be afraid of failure. "With persistence and determination, you'll eventually succeed."

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