



THE LAST WORD

February 16, 2012 8:04 pm

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For a snip these barbers cut both hair and time

By Ben McLannahan



Hitoshi Nozawa needs a haircut. But he also needs to be back in his office within half an hour for a meeting. That is why the 55-year old salaryman has dropped in on his local QB (“Quick Beauty”) House, a chain of discount barber shops that is now pushing overseas, having conquered large parts of Japan.

The Shinbashi salon in central Tokyo is one of 435 QB outlets in which you will never get a cup of tea, let alone a hot flannel or a head-rub.

“It’s cheap, it’s quick and it’s easy,” says Mr Nozawa, who emerges with a neat buzz-cut.

In the same way that [Toyota](#) applied lean manufacturing principles to the production of cars, QB has stripped down the service of hairdressing. There are no phones, no toilets, no juniors with brooms – just three or four stylists, one for each “cut station”, ready to go.

Electronic sensors under seats tell passers-by, via a “traffic-light” display in the window, how long

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they will have to wait.

Once inside, they feed a Y1,000 bill (\$12.75) into a machine, take a ticket like a deli-counter shopper, and wait for the next available stylist. In the chair, there is no banter or any magazines to flick through. Nor is there any rinse at the end. Instead, a patented “air wash” nozzle sucks away loose hairs.

“We’re more interested in taking things out than adding things,” says Yasuo Kitano, chief executive of the chain’s owner, QB Net Co. “Our emphasis is on affordability. If we reduce clutter, we reduce cost.”

He is “ruthless”, he says, about stripping out anything that might threaten the advertised 10-minute treatment. A man’s cut at a traditional barbershop in Japan can stretch to an hour, and costs between Y3,000 and Y5,000. If each QB stylist can trim six heads in that time, the economics speak for themselves.

QB has encountered some resistance. After it launched in 1995, rivals resorted to evoking Japan’s postwar Barber Law, which requires running water in all premises. “The law dates from a time when most Japanese people washed their hair once a week, and many had head lice,” says Mr Kitano.

To dodge the protests, QB installed sinks, “even though we don’t use them”.

When Japan’s new prime minister, [Yoshihiko Noda](#), used his QB habit to reinforce his everyman credentials last September, it was a nice bit of publicity. But given that Mr Noda had also just likened himself to a bottom-dwelling loach-fish, it also strengthened a certain image of QB as a place for those long past caring.

Overseas, too, it has stumbled at times as it tries to expand. When a Singaporean franchisee sold assets and staff to an uncannily similar outfit six years ago, QB unsuccessfully sued the competitor for conspiracy to injure, breach of confidence and representing other people’s products as its own.

In Thailand, QB was in and out within four years, after its mid-range 100-baht offer (\$3.20) failed to catch on and it clashed with its joint-venture partner on the pace of expansion.

Now, Mr Kitano – a banker-turned-finance director promoted to chief executive three years ago – makes sure QB owns 100 per cent of its non-Japanese businesses. It has 30 salons in Singapore, and 33 in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, the domestic market needs to be kept fresh. Five years ago QB opened its first female-friendly “Quatre Beauté” salons – a 20-minute service for Y2,000 – that have proved popular with both sexes. Last year QB launched Ikka, a brand for mothers and toddlers, and FaSS, a pricier, trendier offering.

At a time when faith in [Japanese manufacturing](#) is at a low ebb, QB is determined to lead a new wave of service exports from its homely headquarters in Shibuya. Taiwan is probably next, then perhaps Australia, even the US.

What about Europe? Mr Kitano grimaces. “There, they like to take their time,”

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