

Freshmart

The early days of Freshmart

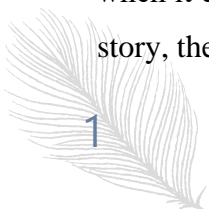
If you have lived in Hong Kong for more than a week, you must have heard of the name “Freshmart” — a local chain of supermarkets. This may come as a shock to the millennials — Back in the days, if someone was asked about Freshmart, they would’ve replied, “Freshmart? Never heard of it. I’d rather go to Happy Grocery or Grocery City.” The store traces its origin back to 2001 when it started off as a



small-scale grocery store in Ngau Tau Lok, selling everyday necessities ranging from food to pharmacy products that were imported from local factories. The store was opened because they would like to fulfill the customers’ need. Their slogan used to be “Low prices, cheap deals”. Despite its low pricing strategy, Freshmart, which was a newcomer in the market, has neither original nor exclusive products. Thus, it was put to shame. There was a long period of time when Freshmart had no customers at all. In addition to its failing business, Freshmart also failed to recruit employees and almost went bankrupt. Then what makes Freshmart so indispensable today? Let’s hear more about what makes it famous.

What Freshmart is famous for?

Freshmart is well-renowned for its brand story. It is a well-known fact that the SARS epidemic shook up Hong Kong back in 2003. Not understanding the circumstances, people started to panic buying and stockpiling anti-epidemic items which led to a serious shortage of supply and surge in prices. In the wake of Ngau Tau Kok becoming the new epicentre of the outbreak, numerous stores suspended business, leaving the residents unaided. Not only was Freshmart the only opening store there, but also the first store to distribute face masks and hand sanitizers for free. Unwilling to take it for granted, some customers even left their money at the store secretly. With the help of government subsidy and rent reduction, Freshmart was able to survive the pandemic. Not only did their good deeds earn them a crowd of regular customers, who were mostly homeless people, elderly and low-income groups that had received their help, but also attracted citizens living far away in the New Territories and Hong Kong Island, giving Freshmart abundant capitals and popularity to expand its scale. That’s the time when it changed its slogan to “Always, completely, truly be there for you”. Aside from the touching story, the empathy the store has been showing is held in high regard. They not merely provide one of



the best after-sale services, but also have the most hospitable staff. In spite of being a chain store, Freshmart surprisingly accepts people to buy in credit — you could pay back the loan later without any deposit. Besides, Freshmart has been on the news for donating a portion of income to the homeless and the disabled. Living in a world full of mercenary motives, the generosity and compassion that Freshmart has taught us is what makes it so irreplaceable.

Time for Freshmart to close

“I still can’t accept the fact that Freshmart is shutting down due to financial difficulties.” said a 40-year-old interviewee, “I have been buying almost everything from it since I was young. This is like the end of an era.” Unfortunately, it is no secret that the store filled with HongKongers’ collective memories will be closing its ten remaining branches at the end of April, which is the same day as their 50th opening anniversary. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the loss in mainland tourists has led to more than 40% of Freshmart’s revenue. Despite selling everyday necessities, the little gain from the regular customers is far from covering the cost of a huge corporate chain store. Yet, the fluctuating number of confirmed cases is not making things any better either. Not being the main beneficiary of government subsidy is the last straw that breaks the camel’s back. The funds are a drop in the ocean as it has to shoulder the burden of high rents and costs. To many’s astonishment, Freshmart is still distributing their last storage of food and face masks for free. It is also worth mentioning that their staff have received a fair amount of compensation. It is ironic that the same reason which makes Freshmart famous is what leading it to its ultimate downfall. It is beyond doubt that its demise has saddened the majority of HongKongers. Freshmart has always been the collective memories of HongKongers, and has stayed with us through thick and thin. Be sure to grab your chances to pay a visit and bid farewell before it closes. Goodbye Freshmart, and thank you.

