

Novels while you wait

A vending machine of stories that fascinates the world

And Francis Ford Coppola as well

Japan is often referred to as a "vending machine superpower" because of the abundance of vending machines on every street corner. In Europe, on the other hand, vending machines were not popular because of their negative impact on the landscape and environment. However, unique vending machines have appeared in recent years. In France, there is a vending machine that provides you with stories that have fascinated people around the world.

Charles de Gaulle Airport, the gateway to France, is crowded with tourists and business travelers from all over the world. In Terminal 2, there is a station for trains heading to central Paris and other destinations. People were passing the time in the waiting area. Most of them were staring at their smartphone screens.

In one corner of the waiting area lined with vending machines for beverages, snacks, and tickets, Didier Faucheur, 65, returning from a vacation in Thailand, stopped in front of a machine. It was as tall as he was. When he pressed the 1-minute button, a long, receipt-like piece of paper came out from the middle of the machine. On the smooth, thermal paper was printed a French story that could be read in one minute.

"It's a great idea, this is a place where we just have to wait," he said. He pressed another button, this time the 3-minute button, and out came a longer story. Both were short stories for children. "It's good to read children's literature. Lately I've only been reading bicycle magazines". With a smile, he crumpled up the paper and put it in his backpack.

The machine was invented by Short Edition, a publishing company based in Grenoble, France. According to Isabelle Pleple, one of the company's founders and CFO, explains how the machine was developed.

One day, the founders were chatting in a space on the first floor of the building that houses the company. There were candy vending machines nearby, and one of them tweeted, " I wish there were a vending machine when you push a button and a story comes out". The idea of the machine, which no one had ever seen before, sounded like something out of a dream, but they were fascinated by it. and actually built one.

"The problem was how to offer it for free," Pleple recalls.

In 2015, about five years after they discussed the idea, the mayor of Grenoble was interested in it. He thought it would be a valuable opportunity for people who, for financial or other reasons, could not afford to buy books to have access to literature.

Once installed in city halls and community centers, they were picked up by local news outlets. The machine that combines traditional paper and digital technology became very famous and inquiries came in rapid succession.

The machines placed in the waiting area of the airport were installed by the French National Railways. The panel has the railways logo on it. For the installers, it is an opportunity to enhance their brand value. "It could also be useful in case of train delays," says Kristan Leroy, a Short Edition's international sales director.

Hospitals, community centers, museums, and other facilities where people have to wait in line are installing the machines.

In February, when I visited Paris, the jewelry department of Printemps, a famous department store in Paris, also had one. The machine is only there for the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day. And it provides customers with only love stories.

The cost of installing the machine is approximately 1 million yen. A subscription fee for the content is approximately 25,000 yen per month. Those payments cover Short Edition's management costs, profits, and rewards those who provide stories to the company.

The company receives 100 to 150 manuscripts a month.

Even in France, known as the capital of the arts, literature is being driven by smartphones. "There are many people who want to write and express themselves, but they don't have many chances to get their stories out there," said Pleple. The company holds regular contests and asks writers to submit their stories. The company's editorial team reads the stories multiple times, and if they are accepted, the stories are supplied to the vending machines.

Many of the stories are by newcomers, but there are also classics and new stories by popular authors such as British mystery writer Anthony Horowitz.

It is not only novels that appear. There are also comics, poetry, haiku, and more, with thousands of works in French and English alone. The genres include everyday life, science fiction, romance, humor, and more.

The company also insists on printing on "paper". Pleple says, "The paper makes the reader feel as if he or she has received a gift. They can put it in their pocket or bag and take it home to read later, and talk about it with their friends and family". If the readers like the story, they can search for other works by the same author on the company's website.

The company is also working with schools and universities. Small vending machines in the shape of cubes, which are more portable, are being used in classes and lectures. Teachers correct children's work, and when it is finished, the machine prints it out for them to take home. "Parents are very happy," says Leroy.

The company's vending machines have already spread throughout Europe and the United States and will soon exceed 600 units. In Asia, you can find them in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where they are available in English and Chinese. There are no vending machines in Japan yet. "If there are any companies or people who are interested, we would love to talk to them," said Leroy. At the same time, Pleple emphasized, "The most important thing for us is that these vending machines are art. Business comes next".

One person who was fascinated by the machines was world-renowned film director Francis Ford Coppola. After the installation of the first machine in Grenoble, he immediately sent them an email, saying that he had read an article about it in an American magazine. He was so taken with the machine that he not only placed it in his café in San Francisco, but also decided to invest in the company.

In a video on the Short Edition's website, Mr. Coppola says enthusiastically, "It's a vending machine, but it's a work of art. And I liked the fact that you don't have to put money in it."

The story vending machine has changed the concept of the traditional vending machine, its business model, and what it offers. Mr. Coppola, who is also known for running a winery, said to them, "Just as trees need nourishment, so do the human brain and heart. It's better to give the brain a snack of literature than soft drinks and potato chips "