Wrist-clasp service gesture: Where's it from?

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They are doing it in shops big and small, and customers just love it.

Over the last year, an increasing number of service staff have been seen handing back change with one hand clasping the wrist of the other.

While experts and customers all agree that this gesture conveys respect and is a sign of better service, its origin in Singapore is a mystery.

"I've started to see this more recently, mainly among retailers," said Ms Caroline Lim, associate director of the Institute of Service Excellence.

She felt it was a step in the right direction as Singapore revs up its drive to improve service standards.

In 2006, Mr Raymond Lim, Minister for Transport and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, led the Go the Extra Mile for Service movement to develop an excellent service culture in Singapore.

Since 2005, Spring Singapore and the National Trades Union Congress have also chaired the Customer-Centric Initiative to encourage companies to commit to service excellence and raise their service standards.

Over the last week, The Sunday Times watched staff at 40 retail and food outlets.

Six outlets had staff who made the 'wrist-clasp' gesture when returning change.

Some staff said they were taught to do it, while others picked it up on their own.

A spokesman for Charles & Keith, a shoe and accessories chain, said its staff were asked to do the gesture when returning coins as it was deemed "well mannered".

But Ms Esther Wong, 20, a cashier at pastry chain Bengawan Solo's outlet in Plaza Singapura, said it was her own idea to adopt the practice two years ago.

"I had seen it being done in fast-food restaurants. I felt it was quite respectful, so I started doing it too," she said.

"It's a traditional Chinese way of service," she said.

Assistant Professor Joonmo Son, an ethnic Korean teaching at the National University of Singapore's department of sociology, said Koreans are taught to hold their right wrist with their left hand when greeting the elderly or their superiors.

"I suspect the root of it is the Confucian tradition of showing reverence towards old people," he added.

Whatever its origins, consumers welcome the gesture.

"It's absolutely more polite than using one hand as that can seem a little rude," said Ms Doreen Lai, 23, a finance executive.

What do you make of the "wrist-clasp" gesture? What else can be done to improve service quality in Singapore? Send your comments to suntimes@sph.com.sg