

A digital village shop

by Max Hugelshofer, Swiss Mountain Aid



The village shop in Cerniat in the municipality of Val-de-Charmey FR, rented at favourable conditions. (Picture Yannik Andrea)

What do you do when the village shop closes because the turnover figures are too low and the personnel costs are too high? Then, a step into the future is a necessary dare. In the village of Cerniat, the “Val-Marché” is now open 24 hours a day – with self-service and access via QR code.

Jean-François Rime holds his customer card in front of the lens and with a quiet click the door to the “Val-Marché” unlocks. He enters, picks up one of the baskets and starts shopping. There is no one else in the shop, after all it is Sunday morning at 7 o'clock. But he is not completely alone while shopping. Several cameras record everything happening in the shop. Soon the basket is full and Jean-François Rime goes to the checkout. He scans his products and selects

the option “monthly bill” on the touchscreen – done.

Of course, payment by card would also be an option. Or by *Twint*. “We offer everything that is state of the art these days,” says *Guy Maradan*. The retired bank employee is the spiritual father of the digital village shop. The shop is run by the “Coopérative Concordia”. When the last shop and the last pub in Cerniat [municipality of Val-de-Charmey FR], which has a population of 350, were about to close at the same time, many people did not want to simply accept this and joined forces to form a cooperative” Today, the cooperative has well over 100 members and has made the restaurant “La Berra” a popular meeting place again.

It was more difficult with the village shop. Turnover was too low, staff costs too high. “What the big distributors can do, we've been able to do for a long time,” Guy thought to himself and began to look into self-scanning systems.

Checkout and order system in one

Finding a suitable scanner turned out to be the least of the problems. There were even ready-made solutions for the access system with QR code. But because Guy also wanted an automated solution for stock management and ordering, things got complicated. “The most difficult thing was to link the inventory software to the cash register.” It took a while, but it worked.

The support

The computerised checkout and access system for Cerniat's village shop will indeed reduce costs in the long run. However, the initial investment was too high for the local cooperative. *Swiss Mountain Aid* made this innovative project possible with its support.

Since 1943, the *Swiss Mountain Aid Foundation* has been committed to helping people in the Swiss mountains. We support projects that create jobs and added value in the mountain region. In this way, we counteract emigration and ensure that the mountain regions remain alive in the future. *Swiss Mountain Aid* is financed exclusively by donations. (info@berghilfe.ch, www.berghilfe.ch)



A wide range of products for the daily use. (Picture Yannik Andrea)

Today, the village shop is open 24 hours a day, and the only additional cost is a few francs for the lighting in the shop.

Most customers appreciate the new flexibility in shopping and, after initial scepticism, also manage the technology. However, those who are not at all comfortable with the new way of shopping are not left out: every morning, the shop is staffed for a few hours – at some point, the racks and refrigerated display cases will have to be refilled anyway. "Even we're not quite ready to buy a robot for that yet," Guy laughs.

Source: www.berghilfe.ch, magazine from January 2021 (Translation "Swiss Standpoint")



Eggs are one of the many local and regional products of the village shop. (Picture Yannik Andrea)

The cooperative strengthens social ties

from the editorial staff of "Swiss Standpoint"

Impressed by the above article from "Berghilfe Magazin", members of the editorial team of "Swiss Standpoint" visited the digital village shop in Cerniat in the municipality of Val-de-Charmey in the canton of Fribourg. Situated in the heart of the village, it offers residents and holidaymakers a valuable opportunity to stock up on everyday necessities and to meet people face-to-face.

Guy Maradan, the pioneer of the digital village shop, takes us on a tour of the premises, the carefully furnished shop with its 3000 different products as well as the storage room and "IT centre" in the basement. Having grown up in Cerniat, he knows every inhabitant personally. When the only village shop had to close in March 2020, he immediately realised that the village had lost its "soul". In his 30 years of working for the Raif-

feisen cooperative bank, he had also experienced that real estate in a village without a shop clearly loses value. He saw a need for action and set about motivating the village population to found a cooperative. The "Coopérative Concordia" was entered in the commercial register on 20 October 2020.

More and more people around the world are acting like the people in Cerniat: if a problem arises that affects the whole community, initiative, creativity and a sense of responsibility come into play. There is no need to wait until a solution to the problem is proposed "from above". Self-help, self-responsibility and self-management are the cornerstones of "bottom-up" initiated joint planning and action in a cooperative. Moreover, the year 2012 was declared the "International Year of Cooperatives"



Guy Maradan, the spiritual father of the digital village shop, knows all the cooperative members and customers personally. (Picture JPV)



Basement of the shop houses the warehouse and the "IT centre" for management and ordering. (Picture JPV)

by the UN. “Cooperatives remind the international community that it is possible to achieve both economic profitability and social responsibility,” said the then UN Secretary-General *Ban Ki-moon*.

Back to the village shop in Cerniat: “It is important for the cooperative members to include local and regional products in their range,” explains Maradan. Thus the former mayor, who enters the shop during our visit and is greeted amicably by our host, finds fresh bread from a popular bakery in neighbouring Charmey. “Beurre salé” (salted butter), “Soupe de chalet” (Fribourg mountain soup), eggs, meat from three regional butchers and, last but not least, the herbal liqueur “Père Chartreux” can be purchased here. The herbal liqueur also has a local connection: at the back of the *Vallée du Javro* valley lies the spacious Carthusian monastery of *La Valsainte*, now the only remaining community of the Carthusian order in Switzerland. It grows herbs and delivers them to their French mother house near Grenoble, where the liqueur is produced in different varieties.



*Today, the only community of the Carthusian Order in Switzerland lives in the nearby Charterhouse “La Valsainte”.
(Picture JPV)*

Although the shop is perfectly digitalised and “open” day and night all year round, local women or men – a young student during our visit – are always present from 7–12 am to collect cash purchases, chat with customers, take orders and stock up the racks. This strengthens the social bonds in the village – a factor for the well-being that should not be underestimated, especially in times of crisis like the current pandemic.