

Colruyt Group Takes the Next Step with Okay Direct

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Okay Direct is Belgium's largest unmanned retail store, open 24/7. There are currently three Okay Direct stores, all located in Ghent. After several years of testing, the next step is clear: placing an Okay next to a staffed store is the path Colruyt Group is taking with its innovative retail concept. As a result, two of the three current shops will close, as they are not located next to a staffed store. At the same time, Okay Direct announces its next milestone: the format will expand to Brussels.

In 2021, the first Okay Direct opened, on Belfortstraat in Ghent. The concept immediately attracted a great deal of attention: Okay Direct is Belgium's largest unmanned retail store, open 24/7. Customers enter the store using their bank card, take the products they want from the smart cabinets, and receive a single receipt at the end of their shopping trip. This unique concept was co-developed by Colruyt Group (Store project Technics Industrial Automation) and Innovend. Within the sector, Okay Direct was immediately recognised with the prestigious Mercurius Award.

Ready for the Next Step

An Martel, director of Okay: *"Okay Direct has proven to be a successful concept, meeting a clear need among customers in urban areas. In recent years, we have carefully tested and evaluated how best to develop the Okay Direct format further. The conclusion is clear: Okay Direct works best when paired with a neighbouring store. This enables us to supply both stores more efficiently and deploy employees more flexibly. It is a decision we firmly believe in, as it will support future growth, although it also means that our two stand-alone Okay Direct stores will close."*

Specifically, the Okay Direct on Belfortstraat and K. Leopoldstraat will be closing. Both shops had a fitting send-off and remained open during the Ghent Festivities (Gentse Feesten). They close their doors on 28 July. The store on Kortrijksepoort will remain open.

Gino Van Ossel, professor of retail at Vlerick Business School and Chair of the Mercurius Award jury, commented: *"When we selected Okay Direct as the winner of the Mercurius Award five years ago, we were impressed not only by the concept itself, but also by Okay's ambition to test the unmanned-store model across different locations and operating formats. It is therefore encouraging to see how Okay Direct has evolved into a profitable format, supported by a pragmatic and affordable technological solution, the right urban locations capable of generating sufficient turnover, and proximity to a staffed store that enables goods to be replenished efficiently."*

Heading to the Capital

Okay Direct is already preparing its next step: during the current financial year (running until the end of March 2027), it will open an Okay Direct store in Brussels. A new Okay store is planned for Waversesteenweg/Chaussée de Wavre in Etterbeek, with an Okay Direct store alongside it.

An Martel: *"Okay Direct is a concept that works particularly well in urban areas. Urban shoppers tend to shop more flexibly and often see the store as an extension of their fridge. Moreover, cities are vibrant around the clock. It therefore makes perfect sense for us to bring the concept to the capital. We are confident that Brussels residents will be just as enthusiastic as customers in Ghent, while at the same time we are curious to see what differences we will encounter."*

The exact opening date of Okay Direct Etterbeek will be announced at a later stage.

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