

FLYING COLOURS

OrangeTee.com's secret to long-term sustainable success is its strong team of innovative and passionate staff **BY MINDY TAN**

ORANGETEE.COM is a company not afraid to buck the trend. When it was first established in 2000, it pioneered the use of online services to support offline services. And even after the dot-com bubble burst, it kept the ".com" in its name because, says managing director Steven Tan, the company believes that the Internet continues to change the way that its agents serve their customers.

"In the late 90s, although it was during the Internet boom period, many real estate companies did not see an urgency to adopt new technology as they were doing relatively well. Hence, in early 2000, the group of (OrangeTee.com) founders saw the potential of leveraging technology to provide value-added services to clients and agents in this industry."

While, for instance, most other agents were getting the information that they needed regarding transactions and/or land information from government agencies, OrangeTee.com was putting up information on its website.

"We gathered all the project information, took photos of different projects and put it up online," says Mr Tan. "Now, it's common; but at that time, it wasn't very common. So we started to collate the project information, and we also talked to third party providers to integrate the map and the litho sheet (which shows specific data about certain locations). (Most agents at the time) had to buy the litho sheet. But we worked with the third party provider and integrated the information into our website so the agent can access this information (online)."

Information technology continues to play a key role at OrangeTee.com. Mr Tan adds: "We have implemented several online services including Property Search, Caveat, HDB Transactions, eLitho, Research Analysis and Project Launches – just to name a few. In particular, the Work@Home function on our website provides a broad range of vital online tools exclusively for agents, allowing them to work anytime, from anywhere."

In 2013, OrangeTee.com launched its mobile app, which not only provides agents with information that they need

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– STEVEN TAN, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF ORANGETEE.COM

WORKING TOGETHER ►
OrangeTee has initiated a Happy Staff Committee to provide a pleasant working environment, along with Positive Monday Workshops for staff and agents



◀ THE DEAL

Tokyu Livable senior executive director Toshihiko Kitagawa (left) with Mr Tan, after signing the partnership agreement last May; following the sale of a 22.5 per cent stake in the real estate agency to Tokyu Livable, OrangeTee is aggressively looking to expand into Japan

at their fingertips, it also has a snap-and-post function which allows agents to instantaneously post pictures of the properties that they want to market on the OrangeTee.com website.

"To maximise productivity, OrangeTee.com has also upgraded its information system to the latest enterprise resource planning (ERP) system," says Mr Tan. "The new system consolidates all databases into one large database, upgrades its accounting system, streamlines the work processes of all departments and more importantly, enables authorised parties to access vital and precise reports that aid in timely decision-making."

STAYING AHEAD

Fast forward to today, and OrangeTee.com is still operating on the outside fringes of established norms while challenging new frontiers.

Three years ago – the same year that Mr Tan took over as MD – OrangeTee.com was the first local real estate company to penetrate into the Myanmar market.

"That year, we provided advisory services to one of the most established developers in the area of improving business excellence and advisory services on the concept, product design and marketing of designed office and residential developments in Yangon, Myanmar. In 2013, we continued to tap our experience to provide advisory and marketing services to another local developer for their first high-end residential project," says Mr Tan.

It has been part of the company's strategy to explore business opportunities in the region, but it has since taken a more prudent approach in light of the increasingly challenging market – mainly caused by policy changes and keen competition – and decided to stay focused on

strengthening its core business.

Today, the company is aggressively looking to expand into Japan. The move follows the sale of a 22.5 per cent stake in the real estate agency to Japanese conglomerate Tokyu group, through its real estate services unit Tokyu Livable, in May last year.

Despite news that Japan's economy shrunk more than feared in the third quarter of 2014, Mr Tan remains upbeat about Japan's prospects, citing the 2020 Olympics and Abenomics.

"Many Japanese companies are moving out of Japan," he adds. "They are moving aggressively into the South-east Asian market. And many of them are using Singapore as a base to expand their business . . . And, ultimately, Japan is still the third largest economy in the world."

"Japan's property prices have depreciated for easily more than 15 years. Because of the economic recovery, property prices are going up. So it's a good time for foreign investors to invest in Japan. So it's two ways – Japanese are coming out and investing overseas, foreigners are also investing in Japan."

Recently, City Developments Limited (CDL) and GIC bought properties in Japan too, so this is a trend, points out Mr Tan. CDL said in September last year that it had, together with a US-based investment firm, invested in a plot of land in Tokyo valued at S\$356 million. This was its first foray into acquiring land for residential use in Japan. Meanwhile, Singapore sovereign wealth fund GIC picked up Pacific Century Place Marunouchi, an office building near JR Tokyo Station.

As at December last year, the Japanese business development unit has successfully introduced investment-grade properties across all market segments to prospective investors and

closed deals amounting to tens of millions of dollars, says Mr Tan. Through the new initiative, four Japanese professionals with real estate and investment experience from Tokyu Livable are stationed in Singapore to deepen the cross-border collaboration and network coordination.

"I think it's a wise move for us to come together because it is not easy to penetrate the Japanese market. By having this collaboration, we are creating a bridge between the two countries . . . (and) we can share our expertise, network and resources," says Mr Tan.

But it is looking beyond Japan to grow its base. OrangeTee.com is looking to set up a corporate leasing department within the first quarter of this year. The focus, says Mr Tan, will be on the renting of apartments and offices, not just in Singapore but also in other South-east Asian countries.

"Now, we're looking, together with Tokyu Livable, at new partners in Malaysia, Myanmar and Jakarta. Agency (work) is very local so we need to work with local partners. But we have all the leads and know-how so we can bring all this context, all these leads to different countries," says Mr Tan.

The corporate leasing department, when established, will help with office set-up and accommodation needs in Singapore and the rest of South-east Asia.

"The Japanese are moving very actively into the Myanmar market; and we are quite active in Myanmar," says Mr Tan. "So we will go in (to the different neighbouring countries) and look for strategic partners to have cross-border deals like investment deals, project marketing or to provide services like I mentioned. The intention is to provide corporate leasing – residential and commercial. After working closely together,



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

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then we can explore whether we can be equity partners, and we can look at acquiring shares. And that’s basically our strategy.”

Overseas markets – which constitutes cross-border deals such as investments deals and/or project marketing – currently contributes less than 3 per cent of OrangeTee.com’s total revenue.

“We hope to bring this number up to 10 per cent in two years’ time. This excludes if, let’s say, we expand and have a joint venture with other companies. This refers mainly to cross border deals and activities,” he says.

A TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

Even as the company chases the top and bottom line, there is a third line that Mr Tan is keenly aware of – and indeed holds dear.

He says: “While I know that my key role is to maximise shareholder profit, I achieve higher job satisfaction from providing a context of growth for our people to excel. When we bring out the best in our people, they are more inspired, more creative and more passionate to serve. That results in satisfied customers and customer loyalty, and will eventually improve the bottom line.”

OrangeTee.com recently introduced a S\$1 million business stimulus package to help its agents in the light of cooling property transaction volumes and downbeat market

sentiment. As part of the package, the company is providing subsidies to defray the agents’ training costs.

“Rookies can now undertake advanced training programmes at no additional cost after they complete their basic training,” says Mr Tan. “Seasoned salespersons will also benefit from the 30 per cent reduction in cost for the continuous learning and upgrading courses. By helping them out financially, OrangeTee.com hopes that agents will be more equipped and motivated to serve the customers.”

As at early December 2014, about three-quarters of the fund have been used. Agents can tap any of the seven components of the business stimulus package which include branding, project marketing, research, office support and career path.

In addition, the company’s management initiated a Happy Staff Committee to provide a pleasant working environment. All the committee members are junior and mid-level employees who are given a budget to organise events and activities for the staff.

Having staff work closely together is key for OrangeTee.com, says Mr Tan. “The management of all departments are committed to support one another as we believe the synergies created would not be easily matched by our competitors,” he says.

“For example, when the Housing and

Development Board (HDB) announced a new policy about the valuation process, the management mobilised both agency and valuation (departments) to provide in-house HDB Indication Price (HIP) for all OrangeTee agents.”

In addition, the company has Positive Monday Workshops which features both internal and external speakers – such as management staff, lawyers and bankers – who are invited to speak on their specialised areas of knowledge. “Staff or agents can just walk into the auditorium for a free ‘charge-up,’” says Mr Tan.

Looking beyond its own staff and agents, OrangeTee.com also donates to charitable causes. It has adopted Club Rainbow – a charity assisting children suffering from serious illnesses – as its corporate charity partner. Some events planned for the children include trips to Universal Studios and Legoland, as well as parties hosted at OrangeTee.com’s premises.

“There’s a saying that Luck = Opportunity + Preparation. But Luck is only one time, or can only last for a short time. If you want sustainable success for the long term, you must have a strong team of people who are able to adapt to the fast changing environment, always stay innovative, and passionate to execute according to plan. Hence the planet, people and profit, which are the key elements in the triple bottom line approach, are the critical success factors in a sustainable business.” ■