

LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

THERE is luck, the kind of random luck you encounter when you pick cash off the ground, and then there is luck, the type that some businesses seem to get through life on.

Is luck the right word to describe companies that seem more fortunate than others? Richard Branson, in his book *The Virgin Way: Everything I Know About Leadership*, says that it is less a question of luck, and more a question of who is prepared to take the greatest risk, and of course, sheer hard work.

No doubt, the two companies we spoke with would agree. In the case of Chin Long Printing, its decision to transform into an eco-conscious printer met with some resistance from customers in the early days. Staff also had to re-familiarise themselves with the raw materials used in their trade.

Taime on the other hand was nimble enough to reshape its structure according to the business landscape, and transformed from a baby wear manufacturer into a distributor and manufacturer of products for babies and mothers.

In the case of both businesses, their strength of conviction has enabled them to survive an increasingly competitive landscape. Chin Long was started in 1976 and Taime was established in 1968, giving them a combined 80 years of experience. They share their stories.



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THE FINE PRINT

BEING eco-conscious and simply being green are very different states in the eyes of local printer Chin Long Printing, following its transformation into an eco-conscious printer in 2008.

Tan Hong Hong, operation ringmaster at Pop-corns POP Communications, explains: "The difference is in the level – being eco-conscious is about the thought while being green is the act."

Started in 1976 as a modest printer by her father Tan Guet Tat, Chin Long Printing is today a full-facility print communication group that is eco-conscious across its different businesses.

Says Ms Tan: "We live in a world today where we continue to exploit our environment. Our perceived green acts may not benefit the environment if we blindly do it. We must know the impact of our actions and make conscious choices."

Chin Long's "conscious choice" to be greener dates back to 1996 when it started up its Point-of Purchase (POP) materials arm, Pop-corns POP Communications, which retails items such as floor stands, floor displays, gondola displays, shelf displays, animators, wobblers, holders, and dispensers.

"Doing POP works prompted us towards an eco-conscious path as we saw a lot of wastage in those early years. POP has smaller quantity requirements which in turn result in excessive wastage of setup resources," says Ms Tan. "So the initial eco-conscious direction was more a resource saving initiative."

But Chin Long's ad hoc "small efforts" at green actions is now inked into its DNA.

"As we became more aware of our impact on the environment, we moved on to use more eco-conscious resources to do our work as well, for example investing in digital print machines. We also recommend our customers to use greener materials like paper-based materials instead of PVC or acrylic," says Ms Hong.

"In addition, we initiated some green practices – for example, we use carton boxes to pack our goods instead of using paper to wrap it. In this way, we reduce the spoilage, and these carton boxes are collected back for future packing."

This concept of recycling is replicated throughout the business. For instance, the printer prints its name cards, coasters and delivery orders on excess paper collected in the course of its manufacturing. In addition, namecards – and indeed, all collateral – can be ordered on a print-as-needed basis (ie the printer does not set a minimum order) for less wastage.

Customers are today more open to the concept of green printing. "It was difficult in the early years when we tried to advise clients to take up more environmentally friendly options. They thought we were trying to short-change them," shares Ms Tan. "The main concerns have always been the same – higher materials cost and differences in appearance."

As part of its eco-conscious efforts, Chin Long promotes the use of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified recycled and afforested paper and soy-ink printing. Afforested paper uses the pulp from cultivated trees. These trees are harvested from sustainable forests instead of virgin forests and other illegal sources.

"Soy ink was extremely difficult to work with when we first started. Nevertheless, we didn't give up. It took us almost a year to explore and finally get the desired print result," says Ms Tan.

Separately, Chin Long has an active outreach programme. "We have many schools as customers. Although we have a higher cost versus other printers, we absorb them (these costs) to remain competitive. Schools with low budgets are testimonial to this fact," says Ms Tan.

Leveraging their relationship with the primary schools, Chin Long made another eco-conscious choice to engage them further. To that end, the printer distributes bookmarks showcasing eco messages that were made with greener components such as FSC-certified recycled paper and salvaged materials for these schools.

It also hosted a group of Primary 4 students from Tao Nan Primary School to share with them the various jobs available at Chin Long, and also how the company prints and manufactures in an eco-conscious manner. ■



▲ STAYING POWER
Started in 1976 as a modest printer by Ms Tan's (centre) father, Chin Long Printing is today a full-facility print communication group that is eco-conscious across its different businesses

BABY BOOM



STARTED by a husband-and-wife team back in 1967, Taime has come full circle. Originally named Tai Mee after founder Teo Tong Hwang's wife and mother of executive director Andy Teo, Taime is today helmed by the younger Mr Teo and his wife, product development and merchandising director Eileen Tan.

Geographically, they also find themselves, in a sense, back where the founders themselves started – in the Middle East.

Not that Taime has not grown in the interim years. The local manufacturer of baby products is today the exclusive distributor (within Asia) for brands such as Tiny Love, Sassy and Capella.

"We've been distributing these brands for more than 10 years, so quality is assured . . . For the brands we handle . . . we will usually study whether it's a feasible brand to bring in for

Cutting Edge

the longer term – whether these brand owners have the potential to develop other products under their brand. (In this way) we have quality assurance, and product line and product range (assurance).”

Taime is also the company behind Lucky Baby, and produces a wide range of accessories ranging from pressure mounted gates to teething, and walkers to bouncers.

“Because we have manufacturers who have been with us for a long time, we are able to develop products with them and offer prices (to consumers) that are probably half that of (imported) brands. This is how we pass on savings to parents . . . Every few years, we change the colours and change the packaging of our products to entice new parents,” says Ms Tan. Taime is looking to roll out a new range of products under a new brand in the near term, which will focus on soft toys for children.

Back in the 1980s, Tai Mee used to manufacture baby wear predominantly. These clothing were exported to the Middle East under the brand Lucky Baby. Following the change in the brand identity, Lucky Baby’s product range was similarly revamped.

In 2005, Mr Teo and Ms Tan brought the Lucky Baby brand to Hong Kong, as part of efforts to export their range of products overseas. It was a success, and today Lucky Baby can be found in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Macau and Hong Kong.

In 2011, they attempted to bring the Lucky Baby brand to Europe, but decided to go back to the drawing board after two years. Not one to let such stumbling blocks derail their expansion plans, they have recently re-entered the Middle East market.

“Now, when we go back into this market, some

people still recognise the brand,” says Ms Tan. “This year, we will focus on the Middle East and India. Our target for this year is to hopefully get a good distributor in India.”

“Next year, hopefully, we can design more of our own products,” says Mr Teo. “But first of all, we must have the market. When we do something, design something new, and produce it, it’s a big investment. That’s why we keep going overseas to look for customers to sustain the quantity so that we can invest in new items. Locally, some of the markets support us, but not all of them.”

While having the backing of the Singapore branding has helped Taime break into overseas markets, Mr Teo laments that support on the local front could be stronger.

“When we sell our brand in Vietnam, they see ‘Made in Singapore’ (they think) ‘no problem, I like Singapore!’ . . . But it’s not like that in Singapore . . . If there are 10 stores selling SME items (in Singapore), SMEs will start to think, I have a good item, I must continue producing. So I think being a SME is very tough. We keep talking about overseas markets, but it’s very difficult for us to move overseas. Even though there’s some tax deduction, double tax rebate, it’s not easy. Like investing in new moulding – it cost a lot of money! After you invest, nobody wants it, at least in Singapore, if there’s somebody who wants it, it is not so bad. This is something we lack. We can produce good items, but there’s no market.” ■

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PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

BABY BUSINESS

Mr Teo and Ms Tan pass savings on to parents by developing products with longstanding manufacturers that cost half the prices of imported brands