



PHOTO: YEN MENG JUIN

BEAUTY IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

AS TOLD TO VIVIEN SHIAO

Most of us have only heard of big overseas brands when it comes to beauty products, but Karine Estelle Cheong (above), founder of local skincare range Klarity, intends to change this.

HOW DID YOUR COMPANY BEGIN?

I started out in the human resources (HR) sector for about three years. One day, I took a trip to South Korea and saw how people there radiated confidence and beauty. I realised that this came from having good skin from using quality yet affordable skincare products. This prompted me to set up my own company, Secretive Pte Ltd, so that I could bring these products in.

But my journey of entrepreneurship was a lot tougher than I expected. As I did not have prior knowledge and skills in business development and product marketing, the first two years were extremely tough and I struggled.

I felt that it was not a viable business strategy as products that I invested in didn't last for more than a few years due to brand closures – so that's money down the drain. Being so stressed out over my business almost made me forget to take care of myself. One day, I took a good look at myself in the mirror and saw how haggard I was. My skin was dull, my eyes were lifeless, and my aura was gone.

I came to realise that being innovative was the only way to survive – I had to come up with products that are original yet affordable. I have a vested interest in beauty and want to look good myself, so I tried to maintain a religious beauty regime. But using a whole range of products was just too tiresome, especially since I lead a busy lifestyle being a mother of two and a business owner. This was when I saw the opportunity to develop a functional skincare line that is simple and effective – perfect for those like me who want to look good effortlessly without spending so much time on it. This is how Klarity was born – a brand that I can now proudly call my own.

WHAT DOES YOUR COMPANY DO TO STAND OUT AND COMPETE?

Rather than offering a whole range of products just to fulfil one aspect of the daily beauty regime, eg moisturising, our products boast multiple benefits in one product. This is why we specially formulate our products to suit the busy lifestyles of many Singaporeans, especially working women who want to enjoy premium skincare without having to go through the hassle of using several products at one time.

Rather than pitting against other brands, I choose to benchmark against other successful Singaporean brands. Whatever successes they have had, I want to achieve the same results, but within a shorter time. However, to survive in entrepreneurship, you really need to have a lot of determination and be thick-skinned enough to take rejection. I've had potential collaborations that did not go through at the last minute because my principal found another buyer who was willing to pay more. It was saddening, but incidents like this do happen, and I believe that we should not falter so easily. These are invaluable experiences that will help shape you, and build the foundation for your business to grow.

HAS MANPOWER BEEN AN ISSUE?

We may be a lean team, but I'm fortunate to have a strong and dedicated bunch – diploma holders and above – who go beyond their call of duty to enhance the brand.

As we are relatively new to the market, there are many product launches and demonstrations to introduce Klarity to consumers and retailers. Hence, the team sometimes works long hours. While I do not believe that working long hours equates to

a more hardworking employee, I really do appreciate the hard work they put in and communicate this openly to them.

As an employer, I am also conscious that it is my responsibility to know and care for them as individuals; and allow them opportunities to deepen their skills as they grow with me and my brand. Prior experience in HR – and the fact that I also had bosses who gave me opportunities to challenge myself and to learn – has helped me in managing my team.

As I travel often to meet clients or retailers, I don't get as much face time with my employees in Singapore as I'd like. However, I try to maximise contact time via WhatsApp or dedicate meetings to catch up with them when I am back in Singapore. When you are growing in size, it is also important to delegate tasks to people clearly. In order for the company to run smoothly, we need to pay attention to details to operations and various roles.

WHAT ABOUT SOME OF YOUR CHALLENGES?

I am actually a very conservative person who upholds traditional values. I don't really make risky moves, neither do I believe in "yolo" (you only live once) as I feel that decisions need to be made with care and proper consideration.

While that has hindered me from achieving some of my personal goals, being a non-risk taker has paid off for Klarity too. If I had been less cautious with my moves, I would quite likely have opened a few physical retail stores, and will probably be bearing the brunt of a downturned retail industry now.

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WEAKENING ECONOMY?

Most women, and even men, would still want to look good when going out despite the weak economy. This is especially so in Asia where the cosmetics and skincare industry still reign supreme. Unlike other industries buffeted by the winds of economic and socio-political change, the beauty industry has gone from strength to strength, earning it a recession-proof status.

Adopting an omni-channel approach when marketing our products has also helped. Consumers can easily purchase products at popular retail stores such as BHG, Sasa and Pink Beauty, as well as online on Zalora, Sephora and Secretive.sg – where the purchase process is fuss-free. The products are also distributed in China, Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia. This is one of the ways we can sustain our brand in the long run.

Klarity is also the first local functional skincare brand to offer halal standard formulations in Singapore, and we are tapping into the Muslim consumer market.

WHAT ARE SOME PLANS FOR YOUR COMPANY IN THE NEAR FUTURE?

We are planning to expand Klarity's presence overseas, with our next big step being an official launch into China's domestic market as early as the first quarter of 2017. ■