

METHOD *IN THE* MADNESS

On top of meeting everyday retail challenges, Cheryl Gan is seeing to the expansion plans of Mt Sapola, which retails naturopathic aromatherapy products; rebranding perfumery gift store 365 Days; and overseeing the automation for production and manufacturing unit Barn & Potter

BY MINDY TAN

IN THE middle of arranging products for the photoshoot, the team at Mt Sapola break into an animated discussion of colours and how they need to bring in more of a certain stock. It is by no means a planned discussion but more an indicator of the sheer number of projects that they are juggling at the moment. There are the expansion plans for Mt Sapola, which retails naturopathic aromatherapy products; and then there is the rebranding exercise that 365 Days is going through. 365 Days is a perfumery gift store that offers affordable aromatherapy gifts for the mass market. Meanwhile, Barn & Potter, a production and manufacturing company which caters for Mt Sapola and 365 Days, as well as corporate orders for hotels and resorts, is undergoing a series of automation as the company looks to reduce the number of manual processes.

All this is on top of the everyday retail challenges of planning promotional programmes and running a company of course. "I will admit I'm not a very easy boss to work with because everything I want, I want done yesterday," says Cheryl Gan, a director at Mt Sapola, unironically. Indeed, all three businesses were started in a remarkably short span of time, given her previous experience – a degree in computer engineering and a career as a civil servant.

Even with so much accomplished in so little time, a staff member shares – a little resignedly – that they are barely closing

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, GREENPLASTICSOLDIERS STYLING: JC
HAIR & MAKEUP: HONG LING, FAC3INC, USING KOSE & KEVIN MURPHY
WARDROBE: H&M



“I’M NOT A VERY EASY BOSS TO WORK WITH BECAUSE EVERYTHING I WANT, I WANT DONE YESTERDAY.”

– Cheryl Gan (right), director of Mt Sapola



ALL THIS AND MORE ►
Even as Ms Gan (centre) dreams of new products and diversification strategies, the company is taking very real steps to continue to strengthen its foundations



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

the gap on what Ms Gan envisions for the company. “We’re getting there,” she says with a laugh as Ms Gan swats at her playfully. The ease of conversation between Ms Gan and the staff speaks volumes of how in tune she is with operations. She, in fact, had a back-end team of just four people – including herself – until three years ago; a figure that has since, in her words, “exploded”.

Up until late 2004, Mt Sapola was obtaining all its essential oils from Thai farms. But a combination of factors – the quest for more unique scents which connected Ms Gan with more farmers, plantations and distilleries from the region; and increasing demand from customers for new scents and products – resulted in Ms Gan looking elsewhere to source for oils that Thailand was not able to provide.

“The current oils that we are getting from Thai farms is lemongrass and plai. We started making visits to farms and plantations all over the world, and eventually we also found more quality oils and (took to) working directly with these providers. Our customers recognise the high quality of these oils, and so we continue to search for more. Now, I make yearly visits to some of them and check on harvests or discuss new oils,” says Ms Gan.

More recently, the company decided to establish its own research and development (R&D) and production team. “Having our own R&D team and production ensures better quality control of our raw material and final product. In the long run, having a factory-to-consumer business brings better return on investment, even for potential investors. Reducing middle-man traders are also cost savings to the consumer,” she says.

“Most importantly, as we own the intellectual property to our formulations and products, it makes us proud to be able to introduce and promote 100 per cent Singaporean (made in Singapore) products to the world.”

Mt Sapola has already established its store presence in Malaysia and Thailand, and the company is looking at the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia. “It’s still in the early stage – we are trying to understand the other markets, do some market analysis, understand the consumer needs . . . But we want to be there. If you ask me when, I would say yesterday,” she says without prompting.

It is not just geographical expansion that the company intends to branch into. It just relaunched its Xextract line of facial serum this year, and is looking to leverage



THE BEST YOU CAN GET
Mt Sapola has its own R&D team and production to ensure better quality control of its raw material and final products

this to roll out more products for men.

“The difference between this serum and what is found elsewhere is that when we develop this range, the concept is similar to essential oils – elsewhere, it could be a blend of different chemicals but for us, if you want hyaluronic acid, we will give you lemongrass . . . When you buy facial products launched by international brands, they may say they are powered by stem cells. We put the active ingredients in a bottle and let you have the maximum impact. You can add it into your own daily product or blend them and use it.”

She adds: “We’re not very strong with face care but I have this dream – I don’t know whether we can do it, but I don’t want people to think cosmetics and just think (South) Korea. I want people to think of Singapore too. That’s in our R&D pipeline for the coming year.

“Eventually, we can branch into natural make-up . . . probably pharmaceuticals as well, specifically supplement pills for beauty. Maybe things like collagen. Hopefully!”

Even as Ms Gan dreams of new products and diversification strategies, the company is taking very real steps to continue to strengthen its foundations. One of the ways that it is hoping

to do this is through the building of an omni-channel marketing strategy which it embarked on this year.

“Going online shouldn’t just be about reducing overheads but rather, about updating the business methodology to suit the ever-changing consumer shopping behaviour. In fact, the trend has progressed from a standard e-commerce site that offers products and services to seamless and efficient multichannel integration,” she says.

The system that the company is looking to implement will streamline its internal processes and systems to increase the efficiency and productivity for its entire team, from R&D and production to the sales floor.

“We’re not strong in e-commerce . . . so with that we hope to have an e-store as well. That’s also in line with our expansion overseas. For our products, it’s very difficult to just do online. That’s why (an) omni-channel (approach) is very important for us. But how to marry all the different channels together is something we need to sort out. This year is really a year of figuring all of that. We’ve had these plans for a long time but just never executed. So it’s about biting the bullet and getting it all down.” ■

NOT ALL SMOKE AND MIRRORS

DESPITE the inherent challenges of the industry – a retail business model which has its share of challenges and the need of a highly skilled workforce to staff the research and development (R&D) department – Cheryl Gan, founder of Mt Sapola, 365 Days and Barn & Potter, is not one to take the easier route. Every piece of pottery delivered by Barn & Potter is handmade by artisans; while all the essences are made using eco-friendly ingredients.

This focus on naturopathic aromatherapy requires extra rounds of testing on the R&D end. According to Ms Gan, about 95 per cent of the products in the market are synthetic fragrances. And while Ms Gan maintains that the focus on natural products is not a fad, she admits that



only discerning noses are able to pick out natural scents from man-made scents.

“The point of aromatherapy is to utilise scents to benefit or enhance the emotional, psychological and/or physical well-being. That can only be done by using natural herbs or plants with their innate benefits and healing properties, and not anything else that simply smells good. While some may not feel much of a difference, there are people who are especially responsive to aromatherapy and in turn, reap many benefits from a well-managed aromatherapy session.”

The problem is that the world of aromatherapy is largely unexplored and unregulated. Most fragrance chemicals have undergone minimal or no testing. While our bodies eliminate foreign substances through detox, many of these chemicals can damage our cells along the way, or trigger adverse reactions in our organs or systems.

On the flip side, a general lack of knowledge has downplayed the potency and concentration of essential oils. “As such, some people erroneously believe that essential oils may be ingested, perhaps due to irresponsible marketing ploys,” says Ms Gan.

“We believe in educating the public, and have always advised our customers that essential oils should be used with care. This interaction with our customers has also allowed them to be more discerning, utilising different oils for leisure or therapeutic sessions.”

In addition to sharing sessions via social media, Mt Sapola also holds workshops where customers learn how to make cosmetics, home scents and skin care. “The objective of the workshop is to create awareness and also generate interest. It’s also to show people that we are genuine – we are not afraid to show you the raw materials, and we are not afraid to show you the process.” ■