

FACING THE FUTURE

Novu Medical Aesthetics’ Jennifer Loh wants ordinary, working-class folks to be able to enjoy beauty and wellness treatments without burning a hole in their pockets **BY VIVIEN SHIAO**

COSMETIC treatments used to be associated with the rich and famous because they were exorbitantly expensive and could only be had at aesthetic clinics in upscale locations. But this is starting to change as a burgeoning group of consumers also want to look good – quickly and affordably. Jennifer Loh, managing director of Novu Medical Aesthetics, intends to ride this trend of what she coins the “democratisation of aesthetics”, where ordinary, working-class folks can also enjoy beauty and wellness treatments without burning a hole in their pockets. “(Our core clientele are) not even *tai-tais* – a lot of them are working ladies. It’s about mass-tige, not prestige,” she says.

Making what was prestigious become accessible to everyone has been a key strategy for Novu Medical Aesthetics, formerly known as PPP Laser Clinic. It is part of the Aesthetic Medical Holdings umbrella, which includes other brands such as the premium P Clinic, and the lower-end Novu Express.

Not only does Novu Medical Aesthetics offer treatments in its clinics, the business has expanded beyond that to offer its own skincare products that are stocked on retail shelves. “Our business is more of a lifestyle business rather than a healthcare one. We see it similar to the fast moving consumer goods sector,” says Ms Loh.

With 11 clinics in Singapore and counting, the brand has expanded out of Asia and most recently into Europe. Ms Loh tells *The SME Magazine* how the business is actively differentiating itself in a saturated market, and what plans she has for the future.

FROM HOTELS TO AESTHETICS

Ms Loh entered this industry almost by chance as she is neither a doctor nor does she have experience in the beauty and wellness industry. Her journey to Novu Medical Aesthetics had many pitstops along the way.

After attending college in the US, she worked there for five years in hotel development, where she was deeply involved in the entire process of creating hotels from scratch.

“I have always loved seeing something grow from nothing – that entire process, getting permits, conceptualising what projects would be like, and working with creative teams to come up with that. That always excited me – the idea of creating something new,” she says.

But she decided to move back to Singapore in 2002, due to



her husband’s work and also because of the growing opportunities in the region. “At that point in time, there were a lot of things happening in Singapore. Asia was becoming more exciting. Coming out of the throes of the Asian financial crisis, there was a lot of growth in the region.”

On Ms Loh’s return, she did not immediately return to the commercial sector. For the next five years, the birth of her first child and being a full-time mother kept her busy. She also managed some of her own investments during that time.

In 2007, she started her non-profit organisation Playeum, which is a social enterprise to support children’s learning. That dovetailed with the time that her own children were growing up, she says. “Even though it had a social good attached to it, we always pushed for it to be self-sustaining,” Ms Loh explains.

It was around 2016 when the board of the former PPP Clinic came knocking. It was also a time when she was considering taking up a new challenge. The business was going through a rough patch at the time as the founder Dr Goh Seng Heng had left due to disagreements with investors on the running of the business. Operations were in disarray with clinics that were closed down and many which were severely short of manpower, reveals Ms Loh.

The board wanted someone outside the aesthetics industry for a fresher perspective of the business and to inject new life into it. A challenge she had sought, and a challenge she got.

TAKING CHARGE

When she joined in March 2016, the business was in a worrying state. She herself was new to the industry. But she was not deterred by the circumstances. “Whenever there is controversy, whenever there are challenges for the business, there are also opportunities. I always like to look on the positive side of things. So the positive side of that period was that the only way was up,” she laughs.

To her credit, she managed to steer the company to a “more stable stage” in six months. By that, she meant securing resources – including the hiring of doctors – to get clinics up and running again. Today, the group is making revenue of US\$20 million.

Ms Loh says that she draws on her previous experiences in the hospitality and real estate business as both roles had many similarities. When one is building a business, a lot of the same skill sets can be applied across different industries – such as managing teams and planning ahead, she says. “For me, it was about

climbing that learning curve in a new industry. That was the exciting part,” she adds.

The next step was a brand refresh, which was when PPP Laser Clinic was transformed into Novu Medical Aesthetics. This happened at the end of 2016. “We needed to inject a bit of forward-thinking to our patients, signalling a change to focus on new products and services that were rolling out already,” says Ms Loh.

It was at that time that she and her team decided to push themselves to increase the number of treatments. They went from two treatments to five in a span of six months. Their range of clinical skincare products was also launched in August 2016, which has since been expanded into four ranges.

One issue that she sought to address was customer service – a commonly heard grouse. She says that steps have been take to improve customer experience, not only through the upgrade of treatments, but also in improving operational efficiencies with introduction of new technologies.

When she took over, one thing that she realised was that the company was “at the mercy” of manufacturers of machines – which were extremely expensive and not fully tailored to their needs.

While Novu Medical Aesthetics still buys some smaller machines, the company decided to invest in the production of their own machines. This was done through an acquisition of a technical team in South Korea which has its own manufacturing capabilities.

Not only did the company save in terms of cost, it also managed to gain control over the entire process,



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– Jennifer Loh, managing director of Novu Medical Aesthetics

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, GREENPLASTICSOLDIERS STYLING: JONATHAN CHIA
HAIR & MAKEUP: HONGLING USING SCHWARZKOPF PROFESSIONAL
OSIS+ AND MAC COSMETICS DRESS AND NECKLACE: IN GOOD COMPANY

“IF YOU’RE NOT ON YOUR TOES ALL THE TIME, YOU’RE GOING TO FALL BEHIND THE COMPETITION . . . WE ALWAYS HAVE TO PUSH OURSELVES. WE ALWAYS HAVE TO STAY WORRIED.”

– **Ms Loh** (below)



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

from making sure that the machines are of the quality desired to getting spare parts. Aside from its machines, the company also decided to pump in investments of US\$2-3 million into research and development.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

It is not just technology that the company focuses on. Ms Loh says that the entire medical team – about 30 doctors – is involved in the process of product development and new treatments.

Most of the conceptualisation for product development is done in Singapore, even though their customised formulations are manufactured abroad. The group works with different manufacturers in facilities across South Korea, Taiwan and the US. “For us, we have economies of scale that puts us at the forefront – not just in terms of price competitiveness, but in terms of knowledge,” she explains.

This pool of knowledge comes from continual communication among the doctors, with their monthly doctor meetings in Singapore, as well as internal online forums for feedback and sharing. It is this treasure trove of data that the group intends to tap into. “Moving forward, we are investing into data analytics to look at patient flow, treatment figures and many more,” adds Ms Loh. “So what do we do with all that data? The next step is to continue innovating.”

Data analytics will enable the group to make more informed decisions when it comes to developing new products and services. It would also help it to pin down trends and

changes that need to be made much faster.

“The trend has always been on time-saving, as well as minimum downtime. I think more people are trying to shy away from invasive treatments,” observes Ms Loh. She notes that more customers are willing to return more often for treatments as opposed to having a longer downtime.

This goes beyond price point as Ms Loh says that it is about making services physically accessible. Many of the group’s clinics are scattered across heartland malls and the central business district. The treatments can take about 15 minutes, with minimum downtime, so that working ladies can zip in and out during their lunch breaks. “You can just do it in the middle of the day, get it done, and go back to work,” she says.

While older working ladies still make up the bulk of their customers, Ms Loh has noticed other new trends as well. “We’re starting to see a lot more males. There’s a rising trend of males who have the same concerns like age spots and acne scars. We are also seeing more young people in their late teens to late 20s . . . A lot of treatments have evolved to address these issues,” she adds.

BEST FACE FORWARD

But with the enormous competition that comes from being in a saturated market, Novu Medical Aesthetics is setting itself apart by positioning itself differently. “We don’t see ourselves as a medical group, but more of a lifestyle business. You can buy our products or treatments only, but it’s all part of a fuller spectrum of what we are offering in terms of

lifestyle,” she says.

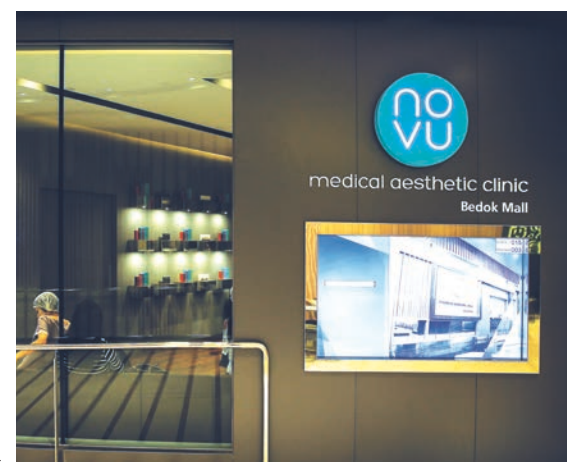
For example, while their skin doctors treat patients’ skin, they also ask about their lifestyle choices, such as whether they are smoking, drinking or not sleeping enough.

Skin wellness has to be treated holistically, she explains. “I’ve got this term that I’ve coined: Outside in, inside out. ‘Outside in’ means what we can do for you from the outside, such as doctors doing treatments, or the skincare products we offer. ‘Inside out’ is what nourishes you from the inside for holistic wellness,” says Ms Loh.

One way that the group is differentiating itself is through its emphasis on holistic wellness. Its latest initiative – called Art Meets Aesthetics – is one where two worlds collide. The group collaborates with artists every few months to support the local arts scene, after seeing how art, the physical body and face aesthetics complement each other. “The arts is the other way we see ourselves treating patients from the inside,” she shares.

Going forward, Novu Medical Aesthetics is not resting on its laurels when it comes to business expansion and growth. Last November, the group opened its clinics in Yangon, Myanmar, and Madrid, Spain. Two more clinics in Kuala Lumpur were opened immediately after that. Ms Loh says that the group has plans to grow the brand through joint ventures and franchises outside Singapore. “Our focus has been on the Asia-Pacific, but with the first Europe clinic opening in Madrid, we have Europe in our sights as well,” she adds.

While the journey has certainly not been smooth sailing, the group certainly seems to be on an upward swing. Even so, Ms Loh says that she will never “want to be comfortable” with the status quo. She adds: “If a businessperson is not worried, that’s a sign of trouble. Even at this point, I think there’s always potential for anything to happen. If you’re not on your toes all the time, you’re going to fall behind the competition . . . We always have to push ourselves. We always have to stay worried.” ■



◀ FOR THE MASSES

At Novu Medical Aesthetics, ordinary working-class folks can enjoy affordable beauty and wellness treatments