

TIMBER flooring installer Perswood (then named Sin Kim Heng) had a problem – it was not so much that they were unknown, it was that their customer base was greying; it was not that customers were unfamiliar with their products, it was that they were not matching the product solution with the company name.

The problems were multifold – architects and designers (the specifiers) were not specifically requesting for Perswood products which meant that the procurement team was simply sending in generic procurement requests. In addition, they were treating Perswood as contractors rather than partners with technical know-how.

“The other thing we were seeing in the specifier business was that they are trying to build their own reputation, and they want to push the boundaries themselves. If they see it as having a partner to bring these ideas to fruition, then it’s a very different relationship,” says Kim Faulkner, CEO of brand consultancy Activiste.

One of the first things that Activiste and Perswood’s CEO Tan Lih Tuan decided was to put the solution brand – Perswood (which was what specifiers were familiar with anyway) – front and centre of all their branding efforts related to the solutions side of their business.

But the branding exercise went far beyond creating a logo for Perswood. It also involved carving out a separate business unit (Timplex) for the timber product supply business which is aimed at contractors. This helped reduce any confusion that customers had, whether they were specifiers or contractors.

Not that having a relevant logo is not important – it is an important visual connect, points out Ms Faulkner, but branding is about bringing clarity to the business owner and the business’s customers. “I see a lot of SMEs come up with a new brand – but all it is is a new identity. It’s the exact same business with a new sign. And it makes no difference! Or . . . (they will ask) this is the digital age, how can I use social media? And I keep saying, it’s just a channel. The question is, what is the content you are putting into the social media? What is the conversation you’re starting?”

“You could actually be doing very well. Branding doesn’t come in when you’re not doing well . . . All businesses will reach a point where you’re not going to grow incrementally very much further. You can have some good years, some bad, but it’s all around there. And for businesses that are doing well, our challenge is how can we unlock further value.”

It is also about creating a message that flows through the entire organisational structure and subsequently, the organisation’s strategies. Says Ms Tan: “The way we are run, we have a sales team that goes and talks to the client. So we need to teach them to ask the right questions.”

These days, the conversation that Perswood’s sales team is having is not just about flooring, it is about selling the concept. This same language is



CONSTANT CONSTRUCTION

BY MINDY TAN

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being spoken by the company’s project managers and project coordinators – when they see a slight misalignment, they no longer simply lay the flooring and consider it a job done, they highlight it to the contractors and architects, says Ms Tan.

Not that companies should undertake a branding exercise without any clear goals in mind. Says Adam Flinter, director of Golden Equator Consulting: “Generally if it isn’t broke, then don’t fix it. There is always a danger of doing something for the sake of it and making your brand perception worse.”

According to Mr Flinter, there are four major scenarios where businesses might feel a pressing need to rebrand – when the business is changing direction or it is being merged with another business; if the brand is seriously damaged; or if there is a significant mismatch between the public perception of the brand and the company’s internal perception.

LOOKING OVERSEAS

Chinese restaurant Putien was in one such situation. After successfully setting up shop in Hong Kong in 2014, the company decided to shift its sights to the mainland. Working with International Enterprise (IE) Singapore, it successfully opened its first outlet in Shanghai in June this year.

Says Fong Chi Chung, founder and CEO of Putien: “IE Singapore provided much PR (public relations) strategy and implementation support through the Tasty Singapore initiative. Previously, most of the reviews we received were mainly word of mouth from customers or media who liked our dishes.”

IE’s Tasty Singapore initiative thus provided the base from which local food companies – both food manufacturers and food services companies such as restaurants – could make the leap into Shanghai.

“One characteristic of Putien dishes is that it focuses on the bringing out the original taste of each ingredient. In order to do so, much effort is taken starting from the selection of the freshest ingredients to the preparation of the dishes. Through the event, we managed to introduce the media not only to our dishes, but also to the way we prepare and source for our ingredients. This gave the media a much more comprehensive understanding of what Putien is about and also generated much more media reports.”

The company also leveraged the Singapore brand and all its associations, rebranding its slogan to “Well known in Singapore, Original Putian dishes”.

“Over the 15 years in Singapore, Putien has also won many awards and accolades from celebrities and renowned food critics. We also highlighted this in our communication in China to further build our brand image. To Chinese consumers, being a Singapore brand also means higher food safety standards and better production quality. This association gives us an advantage over other Chinese brands,” says Mr Fong.

In IE Singapore’s case, the question revolved around selling the concept of Singapore cuisine. The problem was further compounded by the fact that the brands under its umbrella spanned the gamut from Italian (Pasta Mania) to Chinese (Putien). “There’s no such thing as Singapore cuisine. That’s the challenge we face when we’re doing branding here in Singapore. It’s unlike Thai or Malaysian food where there are certain food they can associate with their own country. We’re a bit mixed up!” says Liane Ong, regional director, East China, IE Singapore.

Instead, IE Singapore decided to go with the slogan “Make Meal Moments Matter More” to focus on the experience. “It is industry branding. When you go out, what do you want

Y ALL ABOUT THE BRAND
One of the first things that Ms Faulkner (left) and Ms Tan (right) have done is to put the solution brand front and centre of all branding efforts related to the solutions side of the business



people to associate Singapore food with? Is it diversity, the metropolitan experience, good quality, or the passion with which we deliver the food experience?”

With that umbrella framework in place, IE then works with companies (and a PR retainer) over two to three months to understand the company’s target market and subsequently craft messages to suit each company.

“There are also things like crisis management, which we think is important,” says Ms Ong. “It’s good for companies to be aware of what they should be looking out for, how to better prepare themselves should they ever face a PR crisis that’s related to their business.”

She adds: “We’ve identified nine or 10 companies which

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we want to do this process with – as they push out their message, we want to align the Tasty Singapore message with their company message as well.”

STARTING ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Branding is not just for companies that have attained a certain bulk. Indeed, it is advisable for companies in the early stages of their life cycle to look at their branding strategy more frequently.

Says Golden Equator’s Mr Flinter: “I think that most companies in the early stages of their life cycle should look at whether their mission statement matches up to their branding strategy. As they tend to pivot a lot, then they should also look at their brand values at the same time.”

More established companies on the other hand should have an internal exercise once a year. Says Mr Flinter: “It might be a good idea to do research every couple of years (be it social listening or deeper focus group type research) to see the way your brand is being spoken about by the consumers you are trying to reach.”

Says Vincent Chow, principal branding design consultant for Studio Workz: “Branding and rebranding can be made affordable to SMEs too – the trick is to focus on communication touchpoints that are most commonly used and most effective for the company. SMEs can first define their brand strategies, and focus on developing communication materials to align with the brand strategies. Consistency is always key to branding. Maintain a set of guidelines and ensure staff consistently implement them.” ■