

PLUGGING THE GAP

EVER wondered why individuals decide to take on the challenge of building a company or creating new inventions? Perhaps you are wondering this of yourself – why you could not simply live with things being the way they are?

According to Victor Hwang, founder of Silicon Valley-based innovation design firm T2 Venture Creation and executive director of the Global Innovation Summit, an entrepreneur knows that there are much easier ways to make money or to get a thrill or to feel independent. And this is what drives them.

“The desire to build ventures, devise solutions, and bring ideas to life is core to the human condition,” he says. Underneath it all, individuals create because they care about things; they build because they believe anything is possible; and they innovate because they are inspired by others around them.

He adds: “When entrepreneurship and innovation don’t thrive, after you strip away everything on the surface, it’s always because people somewhere, for some reason, have stopped caring, stopped believing, or stopped being inspired.”

In this edition of Cutting Edge, we feature two young Singapore companies that were born because the founders saw a gap in the market and cared enough to want to introduce a fresh and innovative approach to plug that gap.

While one company provides shirt tailoring services, the other manufactures wet wipes. Both are distinctly Singaporean, and are definitely players to watch in their respective fields.



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◀ **WIPE OUT**
Founded by (from left) brothers Tan Hock Kiam and Tan Hock Thye, Kleen-Pak taps the potential for wet wipes in the areas of personal care, skincare, homeware and institutions



A CLEAN ACT

SINGAPORE company Kleen-Pak wants to become the Foxconn of the wet wipes world. Founded in 2013 by brothers Tan Hock Kiam, 47, and Tan Hock Thye, 53, Kleen-Pak was envisioned to draw on the largely untapped potential for wet wipes in the areas of personal care, skincare, homeware and institutions, beyond just babies.

“The Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic in March 2003 confirmed the viability of our business plan,” says the younger Mr Tan, who is managing director of Kleen-Pak. “There is also a growing trend among retailers and major brand owners towards private labels, and we want to position ourselves to tap these demands.”

When asked how technology features in the business, he said that it is mostly evident in materials, formulation chemistry and converting machinery. “Materials-wise, wet wipes have evolved from the good old days of ‘plain vanilla’ type of rolled-up wet wipes in canisters using thin, rough and synthetic-like substrate to using a wide variety of non-woven as substrate whether it is plain or embossed or perforated.”

The formulation of wet wipes for different end-use applications has also played a huge role in making chemical industry partners seek out the latest ingredients, he added.

Moreover, the packaging formats in which wet wipes are presented have transformed from individually-wrapped sachets to canisters to soft-packs with resealable labels and plastic lids. This has put a strong demand on the machinery suppliers to keep up, says Mr Tan.

To meet growing demand from its regional customers, Kleen-Pak is looking to set up new manufacturing facilities overseas. For a start, it opened a new factory in Vietnam in November 2014. Says Mr Tan: “This will form a new manufacturing base to tap into the growing demand from our customers in Asean.”

Aside from serving customers in the region, Kleen-Pak’s overseas operations also provide its

Singaporean employees with opportunities for overseas postings and regional responsibilities.

Openness in sharing information with customers from concepts to product launches has significantly differentiated Kleen-Pak from its competitors, says Mr Tan. “This, along with making them feel that we will protect the intellectual property of the project . . . (has resulted in) trust in each other.”

Kleen-Pak has some 80 employees between its Singapore and Vietnam operations, of which 20 per cent are corporate office employees. “Our greatest asset is our employees and the diversity which comes with our employees. We have a flat organisation structure where management and employees can work together closely,” says Mr Tan.

He adds that the business is distinctly Singaporean, having started here and having maintained its headquarters – where corporate activities include administration, marketing and sales, research and development, quality and technical services and procurement – here even while expanding overseas. “Where possible, the best practices from our Singapore operations are replicated overseas,” Mr Tan says.

And Kleen-Pak’s customers and stakeholders have shown that they are appreciative that the company still retains its Singapore brand and identity. “Here in Singapore, our business is seeing a growing demand in wet wipes as evident in the expanding shelf spaces allocated for wet wipes in our supermarkets and retailers,” he says.

He quoted a recent report by Euromonitor as projecting a 17 per cent growth in the global wet wipes market from 2012 to 2017 to US\$2.97 billion. He says: “We are very hopeful we will be part of this exciting growth.”

With sights firmly set on its Foxconn goal, the company will establish new manufacturing bases where it feels that it can tap into the growing demand for wet wipes, and where its customers will need the company to serve them. ■



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

TAILOR MADE

Founded by (from left) Lai Chang Wen, Alvin Teo and Firas Alsuwaigh, Marcella is known for producing customisable, high-quality dress shirts

HIGH TECH TAILORING

FOUNDED in 2011 by three then-undergraduates Alvin Teo, Lai Chang Wen and Firas Alsuwaigh, Marcella is today known for producing customisable, high-quality dress shirts. “There was a gap in the market. The tailoring industry had not advanced with the times and was old-fashioned both in terms of front-end consumer facing and back-end supply chain,” says Mr Alsuwaigh, on what inspired the company.

There were inherent problems in the industry, he adds, of which consistency and scalability were among the largest. To address these, Marcella turned to technology, making it the core of its operations from day one.

For instance, customers can design and buy their shirts directly online, choosing from a wide array of fabrics, linings, collars, cuffs and more via Marcella’s website that also handles e-commerce.

“In terms of drafting, we developed proprietary CAD (computer-aided design) algorithms to determine shirt measurements based on raw body measurements. In terms of manufacturing, the fabrics are no longer hand-cut but laser-cut, ensuring accuracy and consistency,” says general manager Esmond Han.

The company even took it a step further by developing an in-house programme to track, log,

update and follow up every single order, customer profile, alteration requirements and purchase history. This is collectively managed by Marcella’s some 30 employees across its corporate office, alteration factory and retail consultant units.

“Which tailor can tell you exactly where your shirt is, which stage of manufacturing it is in, which fabric has how many metres left, or when and what was your previous alteration value at the click of a button?” asks Mr Han. While he acknowledges that there are no lack of tailors that suit every budget in Singapore, it is the simplicity of Marcella (once customers have nailed their fit), the “top-notch” customer service, and the accessibility of Marcella’s five outlets islandwide that keep customers coming back. “Marcella is good, cheap and convenient – all the things Singaporeans go for,” says Mr Han.

The company is now looking to extend its products and services regionally, having run pop-up stores in Melbourne, Sydney and London last year. “The majority of South-east Asia still relies on traditional tailors; it would be interesting to introduce Marcella into the mix,” says Mr Han. ■

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