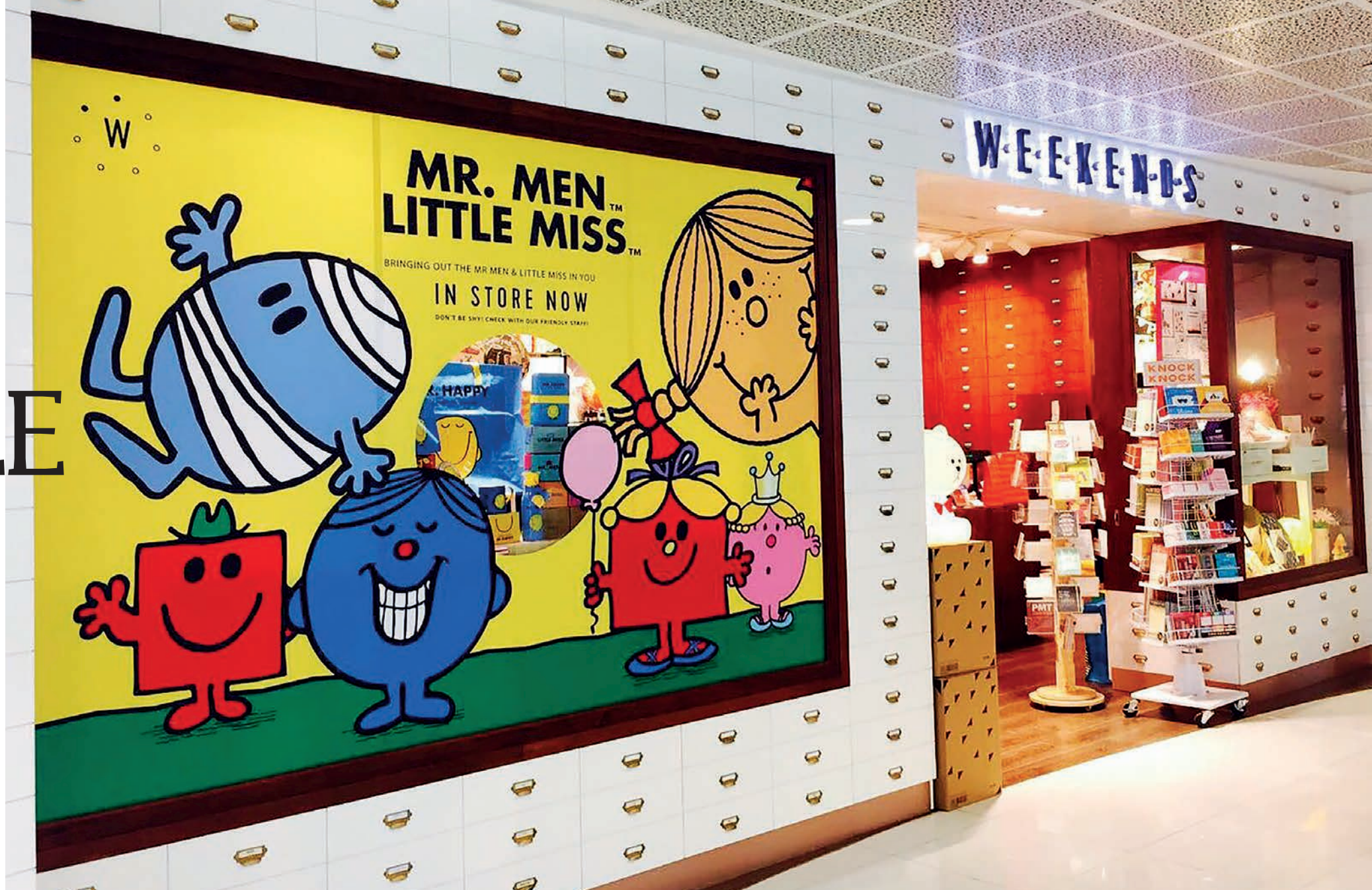


# HAPPINESS FOR SALE



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

One wanted to open a toy store, and is now selling quirky and inspirational lifestyle items. The other dived into a niche by becoming a distributor for collectables in Singapore. The bosses behind Weekends and Simply Toys share their thinking on how you may perhaps be able to buy happiness after all.



## FROM PUSHCART TO PREMIUM LIFESTYLE STORE

IF THE gold-lined white drawers covering the exterior of the store do not catch a customer's eye, the quirky and fun items peeking from inside the store definitely might. That was what Benny Low was aiming for when he opened Weekends, a lifestyle gift and stationery store at VivoCity.

"I wanted Weekends to be a happy place for people, with a light-hearted and quirky feel for my customers. The name Weekends itself was meant to resonate our store with happiness, as everyone is always looking forward to the weekend," says Mr Low, founder of the store.

The quirkiest of things can be found in the store, such as a birthday voucher books with unconventional vouchers for "a 30 minute foot rub", as well as giant Mr Men & Little Miss stickers. "Some of the products we bring in intrigue customers to walk in, some are bigger than life, some are colourful, some are just fun, so people naturally are attracted to it," adds Mr Low.

The idea of opening a quirky store started off with Weekends' sister store, Monoyono. The name is an acronym for "My One N Only, Your One N Only". It is a stationery and gifts store as well, but with a vintage feel. "The name Monoyono itself refers to how individualistic our products are. There are a lot

of quirky items that customers can buy to perk up someone's day, and that's our aim with our sister store Weekends as well," says Mr Low.

The Monoyono store, opened in 2004, specialises in products with inspirational quotes on them. "It is a place where we hope to create an emotional shift in customers from before they come in to the store to when they are leaving," adds Mr Low.

Growing up, Mr Low's dream was to open a toy store. "I was toy deprived when I was young, so my childhood ambition was to open a toy store. But as I went along, I realised what I was chasing was the idea behind it. Similar to toys, our products bring happiness, ease and peace, so inspiring happiness is ultimately what I'm trying to do, so my dream of opening a toy store has just translated to bringing happiness to people," says Mr Low.

Mr Low's self-employed parents were hesitant about him starting his own business, as they knew how difficult running a business could get. "My father was unsupportive at first, because he did not want me to have to deal with things that come along with being a business owner – like worrying about my workers' salaries, and not having a fixed income every month – but eventually he saw my passion and gave me his



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

**A HAPPY THOUGHTS**  
Mr Low says that the biggest achievement of his stores is seeing the happiness spread by his products

support," recalls the former real estate agent.

The Weekends store, opened two years ago, won the Best New Entrant award by Singapore Retailers Association in 2015. But for Mr Low, the biggest achievement of his stores is seeing the happiness spread by his products. "I always wish to inspire happiness, so my stores are a platform for customers to buy something for someone to pass happiness forward. Seeing the smiles on my customer's faces is always very fulfilling," Mr Low smiles.

But with every business comes its challenges. When Mr Low's first store Monoyono opened in 2004, customers were still focused on shopping for necessities, not lifestyle products. "When we first started this business of selling quirky gifts and stationery, people were still in the stage of shopping for basic necessities only, so it was difficult to convince and make people understand what we are selling, since they are all quirky items. But as time went by and a new generation emerged – millennials – shoppers were more affluent and were looking out for more lifestyle products, something that is individualistic, so that's how our store got popular over time," says Mr Low.

The idea to start a business came to Mr Low 13 years ago while he was shopping in Bangkok's Chatuchak market. Striped pouches sold by a vendor immediately caught his eye, striking him as an idea for a business. "I did not have much money then, but I really wanted to try selling the pouches in Singapore, so I called my ex-manager up and asked if I could get a loan of S\$1,000 for me to

import the items to sell," Mr Low recalls.

The aspiring businessman then set up a pushcart in Change Alley, before moving on to doing consignments with Takashimaya and Kinokuniya. "The pushcart was my way of testing if my hunch about this business was correct. I knew there would be a customer base interested in this, but I wanted to try it out first before opening my own store," he adds.

The rest was history. The store now brings in premium products from brands such as Kate Spade New York, Ted Baker and Paul & Joe. The store was also one of the first in Singapore to bring in quirky gifts and branded stationery from the UK and US, with competition at that time coming from Japanese products.

With a growing team of in-house designers, the store's next aim is to create its very own Weekends brand. "We want to create something easy and simple like off-the-shelf tote bags with funny puns, and other items like notebooks and stationery. I think it would be very exciting to see out own products out there available to customers," says Mr Low. The line is currently in the designing stage, but customers can expect the first collection to be available by Christmas.

The store has also been approached for an overseas franchise, but no concrete plans have been made. "Since our goal is to bring happiness to people, franchising out to the South-east Asia region would definitely be an exciting step, so that we can spread happiness outwards and reach a wider audience," Mr Low says. ■

## THE JOY OF TOYS

IF YOU are in the market for collectables, Simply Toys – brainchild of founders Ann Goh and Kee Boon Hua – is often the destination that comes to mind. Its flagship store, located at VivoCity since November 2013, is filled with an impressive range of collectables. More strikingly, the store concept is designed to give customers the experience of how collectables can be used as home décor fixtures.

For Ms Goh, who is also its managing director, this represents a long but positively challenging venture into business, one that began not too long after her graduation. "About 17 years ago, I was thinking of what to do after graduation and eventually decided on wanting to run a toy shop but I lacked the capital and the experience to run a business," Ms Goh says. "Knowing that, I looked for jobs in the industry where I could learn more about the industry and its workings."

After working for an American toy manufacturer for a couple of years, she made the transition to become a part-time owner of a toy store. However, her first foray into business did not go according to plan. "One of our partners cheated us. Knowing that such an arrangement could not continue, Boon Hua and I decided to start Simply Toys together. As young entrepreneurs, we took this experience in a positive light and as a learning opportunity," she says.

During the nascent years of Simply Toys, Ms Goh learnt much about the characteristics of the toy industry and its various markets through travelling. "When we started, we built up our knowledge base by travelling and taking note of what other markets – especially the Japanese toy market – was like, and how we could adapt the concepts there for the Singapore market," she says.

"We opened our first store in Far East Plaza, with the goal of eventually owning a multi-storey toy shop fashioned after those in Japan. However, we found that such a goal was not as feasible in Singapore and instead, focused on having a chain of stores."

Since opening in 2001, the Simply Toys brand has grown to include a number of retail outlets including POP!Life, Simply Zakka, Toy Outpost and the Japanese inspired box store chain, HAKO.

When Simply Toys first started, it operated more like a "mom and pop" store selling small toys from reputable brands and obtaining its stock from local suppliers. This changed four years later when Ms Goh took a leap of faith into becoming a distributor for collectables in Singapore, a move that provided her with more revenue streams which were vital for the growth of the business.

"I suggested that we sell and distribute high-end collectables which were not readily available in Singapore in 2005 as it was an untapped market at the time," she says.

Simply Toys signed its first distributorship deal with Sideshow Collectables, an American speciality manufacturer of movie, film and television collectible figures. "The risk going into such a dealership was that we were trying to capture the market but at the same time we needed to be cautious as these



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

### **SERIOUS BUSINESS** ▶ *The flagship store at VivoCity is filled with an impressive range of collectibles*

were niche products,” she explains.

Unfamiliar with how the market would receive these products, Simply Toys made the decision to order Sideshow’s lower priced products – which still cost over S\$200 – for its first shipment. “I felt that the price point might have been too high for the Singapore market. At the time, I didn’t even think that we would sell five pieces of each design,” she recalls.

Despite her initial reservations, the market responded very well to the products. At its peak between 2014 and 2015, Simply Toys sold about 600 pieces of each design that it brought in. Furthermore, getting the Sideshow dealership set the ball rolling with more dealerships following after. “It was easier to get other companies in because we have shown ourselves to be capable in handling a respected company, so it definitely played into our brand’s reputation,” says Ms Goh.

As the growth of the collectables market in Singapore showed promise, Simply Toys expanded its offering to include more affordable collectables brands such as Funko, one of the biggest vinyl collectable manufacturers. “I first turned to Funko in 2008 as I looked to bring in more affordable collectables for existing customers to purchase and to open the market up by making it more accessible. There was also the need to adapt to the changing retail climate during the global financial crisis,” she says.

Then, Funko was not a market leader but it has since grown to be the world leader in vinyl collectables. Its growth in popularity has also been a boon to Simply

Toys as at its peak in 2015, it sold 9,000 pieces of Star Wars’ BB-8 toy, the most popular character sold. Since starting as a distributor in 2005, Simply Toys currently represents over 30 toy and collectables manufacturers.

The growth of e-commerce, the saturation of the retail space and the economic slowdown have often been cited as reasons behind the recent retail slump. Like other retailers, Simply Toys has not been spared from the slump – but the unique characteristics of the collectables market have allowed Simply Toys to weather the storm. “In the collectables market, cross-border sales aren’t as prevalent due to the cost of shipping and the fact that such items are often fragile,” Ms Goh explains. “In a way, we are partially protected from e-commerce competitors because many collectables are pre-ordered with customers placing orders with distributors like us.”

E-commerce has long been an important aspect of Ms Goh’s business for close to a decade as her customers have long placed orders online. “It’s useful for our customers to order their items online and to collect them in the shop. It allows us to engage in the digital space, while keeping our retail fronts,” she says.

Maintaining a strong presence on social media and other community sites such as forums also kept Simply Toys engaged with its existing customers while expanding its reach to include new ones. “We interact with them through forums, chat groups, and social media. It creates a more personable environment and in the end many of them have become our friends, it



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

becomes a community,” Ms Goh says.

While Simply Toys has adapted to the changes in retail and used newer mediums to engage its customers, the future of the traditional retail sector remains uncertain and ever-changing. “As an SME, we have to remain nimble and stay open to change. In future, if the overheads are too high, we will have to focus on e-commerce while maintaining a single store front, which acts as our showroom, much like our flagship store in VivoCity.” ■

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