6-2018

Foreword [June 2018, issue 2]

Neeta LACHMANDAS
Singapore Management University, neetal@smu.edu.sg

EXCELLENCE EXPLORED

JUN 2018
ISSUE
2

COVER STORY

Edwin Low of Supermama talks about how he's built his team and the differences between Singaporean and Japanese customers.
–p.06

SMU
SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE OF
SERVICE EXCELLENCE
SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

OUR INSPIRATION

Traditional structures are crumbling under the crushing weight of legacy and nostalgia. Restlessness abounds. The bold and courageous, aching to make their mark and break out of the old. To create something that would move the soul.

Nimble and quickened by the speed of change. Sensitive to the needs and preferences of the tired consumer, waiting to be inspired and excited. Often ahead of trends before they come to light. Creating demand where there was none. Repurposing the old and giving new expressions to the tried and tested. Challenging the norm and pushing boundaries that collectively shape and add layers of textures to our very own service fabric.

WELCOME TO EXCELLENCE EXPLORED.

Discover the stories of small businesses and entrepreneurs who have broken away from corporate life, previous occupations, or industry norms to offer their own brand of differentiated experiences. Follow the journey of how these individuals have found their own unique concepts, applied creativity to grow their customer base, and navigated challenges along the way to gain a foothold in the Singapore service landscape.

FOREWORD

Welcome to the second issue of Excellence Explored, the Institute's flagship magazine on small businesses and their take on service excellence.

Singapore is at an exciting inflection point – the service industry is teeming with energy and dialogues around automation, digitalisation, and more broadly, business model innovation. A key theme at the heart of growth is also the concept of authenticity. As businesses answer to the ambition of growth and confront its challenges, questions about culture and values – and how that permeates the whole business - become more urgent and important.

In this issue, we speak to 10 small business owners representing a myriad of sectors about their experience and insight into growing their business in Singapore and the region, as well as their approach to customer satisfaction and service excellence.

Amira Geneid of halal cosmetic label Zahara discusses the importance of listening in order to deliver beyond expectation, while Andre Huber of Huber's Butchery looks at how family values have formed a cornerstone of the company's service vision. Richard Huggins of Rabbit Carrot Gun shares candidly about manpower challenges and his inspiration for radical solutions, while Alson Teo of Stamfles International reflects on inventing the iKook and why automation is essential to scale.

By capturing the candour of conversations with these driven and creative individuals, we hope to create moments of inspiration and invite the reader to delve deeper into the issues and opportunities facing our service sector in Singapore.

Ms Neeta Lachmandas
Executive Director
Institute of Service Excellence

CONTENT

CREATING A CUSTOMER-CENTRED BRAND

Amira Geneid of Zahara discusses how the brand listens to their community to deliver beyond expectations.

One of the greatest advantages of running a small business is the ability to quickly adapt to the needs of an ever-changing consumer landscape. Customers want to be seen and heard, and Amira Geneid, founder of Zahara, a halal cosmetics line, knows that small businesses can turn actionable feedback from their audience into opportunities that large corporations often have no way of doing.

Adhering to ingredients that are permissible by Islamic law, halal cosmetics contain no alcohol or animal products. In 2015, the global halal cosmetics market was valued at USD 16 billion. By 2025, it will be worth more than 50 billion, a demand fuelled by the Muslim community, which comprise almost a quarter of the world's population. The way Amira sees it, "As a Muslim woman, I can better understand the needs of other Muslim women. We can be more on the ball than even Estée Lauder because we're talking to our customers directly all the time. We can also move quickly — if we want to get something done, we sit down, hash it out, and make decisions on the fly."

Amira, let's start with your background. I studied Business at the National University of Singapore, but I was always clear about wanting to study entrepreneurship. I decided to intern with Luxola; Luxola was just a start-up then and I was passionate about make-up, so it seemed like a logical step. After that I knew I wanted to start my own make-up company, but I had to figure out how I was best suited to serve this. I started thinking about halal cosmetics because my sister and I couldn't find a single brand that we would swap our MAC and Benefit for — and that seemed wrong. Make-up is such an important part of most women's lives and, obviously, religion is too, but most Muslim women worry about the conflict because we don't always know what we are putting on our faces.

After NUS, I applied to Draper University based in Silicon Valley. It's like a pre-incubator — you go there before you've even birthed your idea and they help you cultivate it. At the end, investors were coming up to me wanting to know more about Zahara. That gave me confidence, so I thought, why not just do it myself? Two years later, the brand was born.

Can you tell us about the market you serve? Our target audience is women aged 18 to about 38 living in Singapore and Malaysia. They're also typically Malay.

Spending power between the markets is slightly different because of the currency. We've had to keep in mind that $18 for nail polish is very affordable here in Singapore, but if you convert that it's nearly RM60. We actually decided we didn't want to compromise on quality or the actual product to cut costs, so what we've done is to work really hard to increase our perceived value instead. We're working to improve our branding and total experience so that when customers do spend that money, they feel satisfied and valued by us.

Retailing beauty products online can be tricky because people still like to test products, right? Yeah. We're trying to develop a lot more content so people can see our products on the face. We now have Instagram Stories every single day, which is something we launched only two months ago. We swatch new products every day so women can see them on a real person.

We're also developing a physical presence by selling more to salons so people can try the products before they buy them.

> *"I think the best way to serve customers is if you actually listen to them and give them what they ask for. What I say about Zahara is we're a halal cosmetics brand: we build make-up for our sisters and we sell from sister to sister."*

We know that women like to touch and feel products, though, so we probably will eventually launch brick-and-mortar, but we'd rather do more agile things like pop-ups and events for now.

How do you serve your customers and how have they, in turn, shaped your service approach? I think the best way to serve customers is if you actually listen to them and give them what they ask for. What I say about Zahara is we're a halal cosmetics brand: we build make-up for our sisters and we sell from sister to sister.

We can't do that without actually communicating with our customers so we talk to them a lot. It's one of the most important things in our business. For example: we're launching a new collection of nail polishes, and the first thing we did was to send out a survey asking our community what colours they wanted to see. We received 500 responses within 12 hours. We learnt what colours our customers wanted, but more importantly, we learnt that they want to have a say so they get what they want.

Once in a while, if we want our audience to touch and feel products, we do need to go in person and look at their faces as they're applying the products. Are they happy? Are they not? So we had gatherings in the past where we would host a group of 20 girls and pass around make-up. It's like mini focus groups but we call them make-up parties. The aim is to get more intimate feedback as well as foster closer relationships with the community we're trying to build. Having these make-up events is so important to me, especially when we're launching new products.

The best feedback has always been from our customers because they're quick to pick up when we're lagging in a certain area. When products are slow to restock, our customers are the first to say, "Hey, Lady Boss has been out of stock for two weeks. What's going on?" At the beginning, a lot of what we were doing was reactionary, but now we're creating more structure to adjust to our volume growth. We have reorder points, so we know if something is below a certain number, we have to start getting the warehouse to bring more stock to this location.

Customers want their products fast and they also want them in whatever form that they expect them to come in. We once had a promotion where we had a gift set that was displayed in a box, so customers were frustrated when they received the gift set without the box. That taught us that our marketing has to be very literal so we can clearly manage customer expectations.

What do you think good service in e-commerce entails? When I think of good service, I think about the brand and if it has met my expectations. Good service is when I order a product and the product comes to me exactly how I wanted it without me having to reach out at all.

Great service, though, is when I feel connected to the brand — if they exceed my expectations, if I feel delight opening it. I've had amazing brand experiences where I open the box and the scent captivates me. That's what we're trying to build: that whole experience that goes beyond the product. All these little extras like a nice box or a sticker, or something special that communicates the essence of the brand. If these are things I'm getting pleasure from, then I think my customers will too, and I want to bring that to them. ✦

DESIGNING SMALL SUCCESSES

Edwin Low of Supermama talks about how he's built his team and the differences between Singaporean and Japanese customers.

Edwin Low has a long list of accolades to his name. He is respected for his disruptive, sometimes controversial, design thinking, and is often recognised as one of Singapore's design greats — backed with the coveted President's Design Award — who revolutionised the flagging souvenir scene.

Together with his wife, Mei Ling Lee, Edwin co-founded Supermama, a design concept store that has survived Singapore's unforgiving retail scene since 2011. What started as a single shop front on Seah Street has today become three stores: a crafts shop in Wheelock Place, a gallery space in Gillman Barracks, and their flagship store on Beach Road. Late last year, the brand — known for its close ties to Japanese craftsmen — even opened their first overseas outpost in Tokyo.

Despite his impressive portfolio, however, Edwin sees himself as a family man first. More than once he brings up how Supermama has given him the time to spend with his children, Donna (10) and Toby (8). When asked if he would ever consider closing Supermama, he replies without hesitation: "Yes, if one day my children tell me, 'Papa, you haven't spent enough time with me.' I would close Supermama the next day."

Even so, when we suggest that the way he approaches partnerships at Supermama seems to be informed by his role as a father — paternal, protective, mentoring — he is quick to correct us. "No, what I do is not fatherly. It's basic."

Edwin, what's the Supermama story? Supermama started in 2011. My wife and I had decided to take a step back to relook life. We had two kids and we thought we should just take a year off. So the premise of Supermama was never about quitting everything to pursue our dreams and passion. It was just a simple idea of taking a yearlong break to spend time with the kids.

We didn't intend to do anything within that year, but when you have so much time on your hands, you can't not do anything. So that was when we started questioning what we wanted to do with our lives. Being an industrial designer, I had always wanted to start a product design shop, so that's what we did in March 2011.

You've been in retail a long time. What's your service philosophy? I decided long ago that I don't sell products; I sell stories. In that way, customers are not my priority. My sales assistants, my staff — they come first. If there is an issue or problem, I will pacify the customer, but always side with my staff.

What's the benchmark for good service then? Relationships. I believe every shop is an extension of the owner. When customers walk into a shop, they must feel the person behind the shop. You never expect good service from a friend, right? For me, service is just about being a friend to my customers.

"There are businesses that move fast, but what about businesses that are slow like us? We need to learn how to suffer before we will learn how to earn."

When customers come in, I don't want them to equate good service to good packaging, a nice atmosphere, nice scent, good music. We have all those, of course. But I want my customers to leave the shop feeling like they have shaken my hand, even if I'm not actually there. I always tell my staff not to sell products at Supermama. Their job is to educate customers who walk in — to tell them the Singapore story, to have genuine conversations with them.

How do you train them to accomplish that? There is no formal training, but I want them to know about our products. So the easiest way is to have them pick a product they love and read up on the maker, the history of porcelain, how it's made, the difference between porcelain made in Japan and in China. This way, they acquire better product knowledge, but more importantly, that knowledge is always interest-driven.

Wait, there are no formal processes? Okay, let me give you some background. I was an educator before, so that part of me has never left. When I work with my staff or interns, I treat them like professional designers. In fact, my mantra is to prepare them to leave me. I teach them everything I know. My relationship with my staff stems from this simple philosophy: they must eat well and sleep well. When you show people basic care, they will follow and grow with you.

We have structures, but with structures, there's always the hard and the soft. The hard structures are the concrete job scopes. The tasks that get staff paid. Whatever extra they do is their growth — the soft — which I don't manage. What I do give them is the space to grow.

That's why Supermama has grown very slowly. I could have chosen to grow quickly — all I would have needed to do was to build systems and slot people into the roles. But I wanted a system where I can depend on the thinking and the growth of my staff for the company to grow.

And you've now expanded to Japan. How would you compare Singapore and Japan's service standards? I think service in Singapore can be improved. In Japan, every shop you go to has a distinctive character. Each shop feels different. And yet, when you leave Japan, you think about how, collectively, Japanese service standards are so great.

What I hope to see here is more of the founders' personalities in local shops. I think that if businesses go down this route, our retail scene will be a lot more vibrant. Singapore needs more retail shops that are like our hawker centres. Why do we love hawker centres? Because when I buy a plate of chicken rice, I see the uncle. I know who he is.

I would even say appropriate service is more important than good service. The service must suit the personality of the shop, and more shops should show who they are. It's part of the experience. For example, I love Ya Kun because I know the aunties won't dress up in suits. I know they will be rowdy.

Do you think there's a difference between what Singaporeans and Japanese value as good service? Yes, a huge difference! Singapore shoppers expect a high standard of service, but they cannot articulate what they want. So we essentially must gauge what we think is expected.

In Japan, there's a lot of surface culture in service. Service standards are super high because shoppers demand packaging and presentation. If there are scratches on the packaging, the product is rejected. And Japanese shoppers know exactly what they want. Imagine: people are still buying CDs in Tokyo! The Japanese are so tactile in their approach and they expect a certain standard when they walk in.

Why open in Japan then? Many reasons, but a big one is to learn. Singaporeans really need to go out to learn. Our culture is a city culture: everything comes and goes. There are businesses that move fast, but what about businesses that are slow like us? We need to learn how to suffer before we will learn how to earn. ✦

SELLING SERVICE IN RETAIL

Sharon Wong of Motherswork speaks about expanding to China and building brand loyalty with customers and staff.

Sharon Wong, unintentional entrepreneur and founder of Motherswork, is a pioneer of the baby product industry in both Singapore and China. Her business celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, charting its growth from a small-time hobby to four stores in Singapore and nine in China today.

A big-picture visionary but a doer at heart, Sharon prefers to be hands on and knee-deep in her business. Passion is a word she frequently tosses around in conversation: she speaks about imparting passion to customers and staff, and frequently returns to the idea of entrepreneurial passion.

"I always say that it's more passion than anything. And people tell me to stop using that funky word, but no! If it wasn't for my passion for the products, I don't think we would have lasted this long. I can easily get a job tomorrow. I wouldn't have to worry about the staff, I wouldn't have to worry about cash flow. So why do I need Motherswork? Because it's my passion, and passion is what distinguishes those of us who are in it for the long haul."

Sharon, tell us more about Motherswork. Motherswork started from my search as a mother. As a first-time mum shopping in stores, I realised I couldn't get answers to basic questions that I had. Over my three pregnancies, I started to see that, at that time, retailers were just out to peddle products. You name the strollers and I bought them all, and each time — I cried! I couldn't open them, couldn't close them, couldn't get into the taxi. I remember thinking, how dare they sell me this? They didn't care about my needs; they just wanted to make the sale.

The product selection at that time was also what buyers perceived was needed in Singapore, but often these products didn't cater to mothers who, like me, had travelled and seen what other mums had access to around the world. Because I travelled for work, I was able to see newer products in the US, Australia, Europe, and I was frustrated. Why couldn't we have these products in Singapore? Why was it so difficult?

So I started Motherswork to answer all these issues I had with other retailers. Besides a selection of diverse, reputed, international products, I wanted the Motherswork experience to specifically answer customers' issues, because as a mum, there's so much information you don't know. What do I buy? What do I need?

How have you designed the customer experience? The sales staff in the baby industry at that time were not trained to properly answer questions. I wanted that to be addressed, so we focused on helping mums by providing the information to make the right decisions.

At Motherswork, if a first-time mum comes in looking for a new stroller, the team will first ask questions to better understand the customer's lifestyle before showing them suitable strollers. Often it's not about buying the product; it's about finding the right product for you. We offer that decision-making process.

We make it a point to explain the product and demonstrate how it works. We sell information and service to help you arrive at your decision.

You have so many products. How do you train your staff to be well-versed in everything? It takes a long time. Working for us is like working for four different stores because we have so many brands and products. We divide our products into four categories — apparel, strollers, feeding, and toys — and try to rotate staff through the categories. Each person is first allocated one category, and they must know everything in that category before they can move on to the next one.

I've always believed that customers will return if you are able to give them informed answers. So we begin with product training — we have brand principals and brand owners who come in to teach staff about the products. We also have store managers who continuously retrain the team after the brand principals have done their sessions. After their training, we test them. In the early years, I would always go in to play the nasty customer who knows everything, and that's how we tested to see if the staff knew everything in each category. They had to be able to sell me the product. It challenges them, but in a fun way, and what I noticed is that the training also imparts our passion for products to them.

> *"You must understand: I didn't start Motherswork as a business. If I were always counting my last dollar, I don't think I would have survived and been able to compete with the big boys."*

Staff are also taught basic questions and answers to help in a customer's decision-making process, but a lot of knowledge is learned on the job too. We pair them with a senior staff so they can understand how these managers reply and talk to customers.

You expanded to China five years ago. It wasn't based on some profit and loss statement to decide on opening there. China was based on the fact that if I'm going to open outside Singapore — which we had to, because Singapore has 30,000 babies — it would be a whole new ball game whether it was a one hour or five hour flight away.

What are some differences you've noticed between your Singaporean and Chinese customers? Money is not an issue for the Chinese. The issue is trust. Singapore customers are more mature: when we buy something online, we expect to receive the product as we've seen it online or all hell will break loose. But, in China, the Chinese business people look for margins throughout, so what customers see online is not necessarily what they will receive.

What has growing overseas meant to your team? I think the journey has been important for the team. Before we opened in China, the Singapore team had always been just a sales team. So we empowered them by telling them they're not just salespeople; they are trainers, managers, leaders. We took them to China and we had them train the Chinese team.

Everyone always says that in retail, it's location, location, location. But what if you have the wrong team? I really think it's about people, and people need to grow.

Your first Chinese employees are still with Motherswork five years on. What's your secret? There is no magic formula. It's not because we buy them. I always think that if you think you can afford it, someone else can afford more. Of course, they have to survive, so we pay market rate.

Maybe it's because I'm very hands-on. There's a certain respect that I get because I'm there. In fact, in the beginning, the Chinese team used to ask me, "Why are you here again?" And I said, "I'm always here." Chinese bosses are usually not hands-on; business is just numbers to them. But my staff have a direct connection to me.

You must understand: I didn't start Motherswork as a business. If I were always counting my last dollar, I don't think I would have survived and been able to compete with the big boys. It was really about the passion of Motherswork being the store I wanted as a young mum. It's always been passion first. ✦

PASSION MADE PRACTICAL

Declan Ee of Castlery breaks down the importance of localising brand expansion and the difficulties of scaling customer service.

"The day I entered banking, I thought about when I could leave. I've always had different interests. You just find partners you can click with and balance you out. That's how I am able to do so many things."

Declan Ee may only be 35 years old, but the man already has more ventures to his name than many of us retire with. He started his first business venture when he was just 19 years old. At 21, he wrote and directed a musical — *Pagoda Street* — staged in both London and at the Esplanade. He's been an investment banker, and currently splits his time between running his family business; co-running an investment fund in London; producing Billboard-ranking electronic music with partners; bringing up two young sons, who he intends to home school; and co-running Castlery, a runaway success of affordable, customisable furniture.

Founded in 2013 with just two sofas and a makeshift work desk, Castlery now owns their factory in Shenzhen, two showrooms in Singapore, and a 12,000 sq. ft. studio in Sydney. In May 2017, they launched Castlery Feat, a series of furniture pieces designed in collaboration with international furniture designers. In December 2017 — within only four months of opening in Australia — Castlery Australia reported a revenue of over AUD 1 million. So what's next?

"*In today's world you can't just be one-dimensional — customers want more than that. That's why cafes now are no longer just cafes; they're also a shop.*"

Declan, let's start with how Castlery has designed the customer journey. Before we started Castlery, we sat down to discuss the key pain points in furniture retail, and as far as possible, tried to use technology to overcome those experiences because we wanted to reduce human error.

There are two examples I can give. One: price transparency wasn't there. We wanted to make sure that customers were seeing the same things online and in store. They don't want to feel like they're being taken for a ride, you know?

The other thing was customers not being able to receive products within the required timeframe. Let's say the customer needs a certain number of items in one month, but the pieces are only available three, four months later. It's frustrating! That's why we spent months building our Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system to let them sort items online by lead time. It's information we already had on the backend but made accessible to customers on the frontend. That eliminated a huge pain point.

Many customers start their Castlery journey online, so we've tried to make it as holistic and pleasant as possible. We want them to have all the information they need to decide whether they are interested before they walk into the store, so we provide a lot of information on the website — colours, measurements, references, photos.

Once they decide they want to see the pieces in person, they can use our appointment system to book in for a one-on-one consultation with us in the showroom.

How has your service approach changed since you first started? It was very personalised when we started. The founders, the partners, the managers — we were all involved on the service side. And that was great, but it wasn't scaleable.

Two years in, we decided to make things more systematic. We hired a customer service team, and to accelerate the learning process, we hired experienced people from the industry.

Providing good service is not always easy. How do you continue to be thoughtful in every interaction? To hear what the customer is saying, and where appropriate, give them something so they feel special? Sure, when something goes wrong, we can step in to fix the situation, but that's not a sustainable solution, and it's also not fair to other customers. So this becomes a question of how you empower your staff, and that's not always straightforward. Our next step is to figure out how we are going to create that 'wow' moment, but at scale.

Do you know how you're going to do that? In today's world you can't just be one-dimensional — customers want more than that. That's why cafes now are no longer just cafes; they're also a shop.

Our approach has always been more reactive, but going forward, we're looking to strike up meaningful partnerships and hold events with brands that speak to the same demographic as us. Of course, it's also important to balance brand experience with the possibility of conversion.

You expanded to Sydney last year. Can you share some insights on building a brand there? One thing we learned is that there's real Aussie pride, so we worked on localising our pieces. We worked with local designers to understand what consumers wanted and how we could improve. It was a consultative process — we spoke to journalists, designers, influencers, and we listened to what they said.

We learned that customer expectations also differ. Singapore is small so customers expect things to arrive immediately, but Australians are happy to wait. For our first delivery there, the guy was shocked at how quickly we delivered. He actually told us the sofa had arrived too soon!

Australian customers are also focused on a number of things. One is design — they ask more technical questions, but I think that's a function of home improvement being a huge thing there. A lot of them have a shed or a holiday home, and spend weekends doing home improvement work like carpentry, so they have a grasp of these things. We don't have that here because most of us lack space.

Our Australian customers also ask more questions about where our items are from — where we get materials, what the factory's environment is like. We don't get questions like that here.

With all the travelling you do, what do you think of local service standards? With the hipster movement here, there's definitely more pride now, I think, but there's also a tendency to see service positions as just a job.

When we go overseas, we usually think service is better, but you have to remember they're also paid better, so of course service is better! You can see that here too — the really good servers tend to be well paid, and then there are those who are just doing their jobs. It's tough. I think a lot of industries and occupations here will need to pay more for service standards to improve, but that will also push inflation.

And service is a two-way thing. Culturally, there's this idea of just doing your thing and moving on instead of engaging. Maybe you're more open to chatting when you're overseas, but here, as a Singaporean diner, you think, *why are you talking to me so much?* So we don't encourage that behaviour.

What's next for Castlery? The drive for us has always been to try to scale because we knew going in that this is an industry that requires scale. We want to build a fully integrated furniture brand with a sophisticated supply chain and strong digital presence, combined with a retail experience that customers will come back for. There are many areas we can go into, but ultimately, to scale, we need to develop a long-term relationship with our customers. ✦

REFRAMING DINING

Cheng Hsin Yao of Picnic explains how he has future-proofed his latest restaurant with technology and design.

In 2012, Cheng Hsin Yao left the banking industry to set up his first F&B venture, Omakase Burger, based entirely on a recipe he had spent two years perfecting. At a time when restaurateurs were gunning for taller, fancier burgers, Hsin Yao made waves for a no-frills product that was all about the grilling technique. It is hardly surprising that he has once again marched to the beat of his own drum, leaping over common industry pitfalls with his latest venture, Picnic.

Picnic is billed as a 10,000 sq. ft. restaurant, but in a single day it can be used as a coffeehouse, food court, business lunch venue, urban dinner spot, sleek bar, and even, says Hsin Yao, a remote office for freelancers. The space houses nine different culinary concepts, seven of which are served out of "food trucks" — standalone food stalls modelled after the icons of street food culture.

Perhaps the best way to understand Picnic's revolutionary concept is to compare it to the now ubiquitous co-working office. Similar to how co-working spaces have allowed companies to ditch bloated overheads, work in friendlier and more flexible environments, and enjoy complementary facilities, Picnic has broken the rigidity of traditional restaurants to offer both a new dining experience for customers, and a new business model for restaurateurs. Stepping into Picnic even feels like entering a hip co-working concept: artificial turf underfoot; hanging foliage overhead. Gone are the familiar banquet-style tables — in its place is a selection of picnic tables, bar stools, arcade games. Could this be the future of F&B?

Hsin Yao, how did you develop the concept for Picnic? Food is like fashion: a few years ago, tapas was all the rage, but now you don't really hear about it. I was concerned about the volatility of having a single concept store with Omakase and wanted to diversify our portfolio, but it would be high risk to fit out several places in different locations. In Singapore, larger food groups do well because they have economies of scale. To reach that level, you have to reach a certain critical mass, so we decided to skip ahead by building our own environment to support different concepts.

I also started to have this frustration as a restaurateur. When you have a single concept, it's easy to lock yourself into this glass prison. You have a certain look that gives your concept its personality, but this personality is fixed. Some restaurants do well for dinner but they're not somewhere you'll go for lunch; some are good for families but drive away couples. I wanted to design a restaurant that could do everything when I wanted it to.

How have you done that? We designed Picnic to recreate an outdoor park experience indoors. Singapore's weather is tricky, so it's nice to enjoy air-con and be out of the sun. We wanted to cater to different needs at different times — business meetings, dates, family outings.

We have three seating areas, each designed to cater to different groups. The centre is The Picnic Garden. It's the biggest space: good for families and communal dining. Then we have the Flower Garden, which is more intimate. Most of the tables there seat two. We keep the music low in there so it's suited for those who want privacy and quiet. The Beer Garden is a little more urban so it's popular with youngsters who like to hang out with friends over drinks.

Our ambience also changes throughout the day. Our lighting system is brightest during lunch to keep up people's energy, but it's dimmed in the evening for a relaxed feel.

Singaporeans are spoiled for choice, and we're also a very diversified culture. We eat all kinds of food every day: Thai today, Japanese tomorrow, Italian the day after, local food for dinner.

This creates a unique environment where many concepts can survive, but not many will flourish.

Picnic is a response to that. To attract large groups and keep people returning, we had to balance old and new, conservative and avant garde. That's primarily why we chose to do everything ourselves — a lot of food halls do a great job of finding tenants, but we wanted to control curation and be able to change concepts so we can stay up-to-date with trends.

The actual dining experience is also quite unorthodox. Can you tell us about that? Sure. Each customer is given a buzzer when they enter, which is used to order at every stall. Most stalls here are self-service via a touch screen counter; the order is then saved on your buzzer. What's unique is a lot of places use pre-payment self-service where you pay before eating, but we offer the world's first self-service post-payment system.

We did that because we wanted to create a seamless dining experience — we didn't want customers to constantly be taking out their wallets to pay while ordering. We also designed this restaurant for large groups, and we didn't want someone collecting multiple buzzers because it's difficult to tell which stall the buzzer belongs to. That's why we looked for a buzzer with a LCD display. A single buzzer can let you know which stall is buzzing.

Technology is most useful in helping you do things you don't want to do — often menial, repetitive tasks — and it has certainly helped us from a customer service perspective. For example, no one really wants to be a cashier, and our automated checkout system, which also accepts cash, can replace that role quickly and usually without error.

Theoretically, we can operate without any staff. The hardware is there for diners to have an entirely self-service experience. We were enthusiastic about this initially, but we found that the experience took away the romance of dining.

"Technology is most useful in helping you do things you don't want to do — often menial, repetitive tasks — and it has certainly helped us from a customer service perspective."

The primary role of service staff within a restaurant has always been to make a customer feel attended to and satisfied. With the high amount of automation, staff have been freed up to focus on higher-value services, such as fielding special requests and giving additional information or guidance to customers who need it.

How have you used technology to help with manpower shortage? Manpower is a big issue here. We want to retain people as much as possible, and people stay if they're happy. We don't really pay above market because we're quite a small group, and our benefits can't compare to hotels.

So, we compete on a better working environment: we take care of our people by using technology to do the work. One thing that is underestimated by non-industry people is that the food business is quite emotionally draining. Technology makes life easier for our staff by giving them more time to rest their minds. It keeps them happier.

A lot of our kitchen production is automated, which allows our staff to produce a very high volume in a short amount of time. Instead of five people, we only need one, and instead of six hours, we do it in one. Yes, we have a lot of excess capacity, but it also means that we can do more business, and staff have more time to rest. Nobody is very stressed, which is the best kind of environment. ✦

PURSUING QUALITY

Zara and Arif Salahuddin of Bismillah Biryani exchange views on growing a family business and prioritising product quality.

Conceptualised in 2003 by Arif Salahuddin, former journalist and retired computer hardware entrepreneur, Bismillah Biryani serves biryani unlike any other in Singapore. For starters: this rendition does not come with curry sauce. It is, in fact, the way biryani was first made in the Mughal Empire — with emphasis on rice and *raita* (yoghurt sauce). In 2016, Bismillah Biryani was awarded a Michelin Bib Gourmand, cementing its culinary status and skyrocketing its growth from two stores to five in just two years.

Zara Salahuddin, Arif's eldest child and second-generation owner of Bismillah Biryani, joined the family business that landmark year. In conversation, she jokes often about her father's trademark quips — "you have to have your 'pulse on the numbers,' like my father always says" — but is serious when the discussion turns to being a young woman in the industry.

"When I stand my ground, I seem overly aggressive and when I give in, I'm a pushover. It's difficult to find the perfect middle ground, so every day is a new opportunity to learn. I look up to the way my father handles customers and suppliers and try to emulate that, but it also calls into question whether me being a young woman will ever allow me to have similar relationships as the ones my dad has built."

Zara, you were reluctant to join the family business, right? Zara (Z): Yes. I remember my parents would count how many people they would have to serve just to make money for the day. It was hard work! I always thought that running your own business felt like so much stress.

I worked for a design studio in Singapore when I graduated and was heavily persuaded to join the business at a pivotal point when my family wanted to expand Bismillah. I didn't know much about my dad growing up because he was always working, but ever since I joined, I've been able to see a different side of him. When we drive to work in the morning, he tells me about his family or life in Pakistan.

You've spoken publicly about having disagreements with him when you started. Z: Yeah. I think it was because we had different perspectives — I was new so I had a fresh take on everything, but my dad has tried-and-tested methods. I used to tell my mum about my frustration, and her advice was to first hear him out, think about things, and do proper research.

My first project was working with delivery partners to expand our reach. Uber Eats had reached out to us before but my dad kept rejecting them because he didn't have the time and couldn't see the benefits. He felt like people would go out to buy food if they wanted it. I told him, "Convenience is the future. If we don't get on board, we will be left behind."

My dad always wants to return to the times when we made our own deliveries, and my mum can't let go of the relatively large cut the delivery companies take. But I told them it's just not a cost-effective or sustainable solution to manage it on our own. My dad told me he would only sign up it if I handled it.

You currently manage customer feedback. How has that been? Z: In every line of work, there are over-the-top customers who demand the world. I sometimes see my staff disrespectfully questioned, but when I step in, I am often met with "can I speak to your manager?" I assume this is because of my age. It's uncomfortable for me to tell them I am the manager, but I have learned to do it.

I have also learned that people who feel negatively often make the most noise. They go the extra mile to make sure their feedback is heard by posting on different platforms, but if they've had a good experience, there's no reason to get their opinion out there.

We try to respond to feedback about the experience of eating our food — for example, when we first started delivery, we got feedback about the lack of plastic cutlery. We immediately went out to buy the right materials and prepare takeaway cutlery packs!

Honestly, though, most of the feedback we get concerns food, which we don't sway much on. We use customer education to address these issues, like having signs that say our biryani comes with raita and not curry. The level of customer education we need to provide differs with each store. At Dunlop Street we receive a lot of tourists, and at Simei we cater to an older, more Chinese crowd, so we spend more time educating customer about the food at these stores.

My dad also makes it a point during media interviews to talk about where our food comes from and how people eat it there. Not everyone is going to like our food, but we think it's nice for them to know this is the way biryani was originally made.

My dad likes to tell me that we cannot bend to what everyone else is saying because if we always change, there's never going to be a distinctive Bismillah flavour.

How would you describe the customer experience here? Arif (A): Zara will probably disagree with me, but I believe you can't have your cake and eat it too. Anyone doing good meals should focus on making good food. Let's say your mum is making something for you. She's not going to worry about putting on lipstick; her focus will be on the preparation of the meal.

Eating at our restaurant is about that home-cooked food experience — it feels like someone has lovingly prepared it without compromising on quality. Customers come in and get honest-to-goodness food at honest-to-goodness prices.

“We might not have manuals, but I visit this framework often. What we can improve, we improve. Quality should be an endless pursuit!”

Now, if, like us, you’re looking at growing from a small restaurant to a food service company with more branches, then automation is absolutely essential. You’re not just providing for 10 people every day, but for 10 other restaurants that you have. You cannot have 10 different chefs in 10 different restaurants. You need automation to deliver the same flavour people expect.

I think about quality input defining quality output. We have machines that make sauces, equipment that cuts greens and skins chickens. We have a machine that looks at the density of the meat and ensures each piece is cut to contain less than 15% visible fat so the pieces can cook at the same time. Everything affects flavour, right down to the grade of salt you use.

Is it right to say then that quality control plays a large role in your service too? A: Oh yes, but I would debate the word ‘control.’ The control system subjugates it to something like a list of 10 things to do.

General Electric has a programme called SixSigma, which is probably the hallmark of all quality pursuits. In this programme, there is this thing called CQI: Constant Quality Improvements. It’s the idea of always making something better.

We might not have manuals, but I visit this framework often. What we can improve, we improve. Quality should be an endless pursuit! ✦

INVESTING IN SERVICE

Andre Huber of Huber’s Butchery looks at how family values have formed a cornerstone of their service vision.

Andre Huber is the youngest co-founder of family-run Huber’s Butchery, a premium butchery and bistro nestled in the lush Dempsey Hill. Founded in 2008 with his older brother, Ryan, and his father, Ernst, Huber’s Butchery has built its name on Ernst’s experience of over 50 years in hospitality and F&B. On top of serving customers at their Dempsey store, Huber’s also operates a food service arm that currently caters to about 1,000 hotels and restaurants in Singapore.

Andre describes Huber’s Butchery as a family-run outfit — a company that’s powered by 140 team members who embody the Huber family spirit. While the structure sounds ambitious, there is a clear culture of reverence and camaraderie that reveals itself in our morning together. Wherever we go, Andre acknowledges each staff member by name. They, in turn, are gracious to his needs — one even pulls up a chair for Andre’s briefcase when he notices it on the floor.

At Huber’s, building a family isn’t just about implementing systems; it’s about putting values to everyday practice. Says Andre, “There’s no real science behind it, I guess. I think it’s the way we treat all the staff — how we greet them, how we’re not shy to help them. They see how we interact with one another as a family. We bring our families and kids here, and we teach them to greet everyone and remember their names. We always tell each other to behave like gentlemen. To behave like we would in a family.”

Andre, was joining your father in business something you’ve always wanted to do? Not at all. My brother studied automotive engineering and was supposed to go to Germany to work, but the visa application took so long he started working with my dad.

I did a more general business degree because I had always wanted to set up my own business. My dad had always encouraged us to move to Australia because he wanted a better quality of life for us, so I went overseas and enjoyed it. After a few years, I was looking for business opportunities, but it wasn’t easy as an Asian to do something there without the network. I saw my brother come into the business and I thought to come back to join him. My dad had built something so successful. Why waste it?

Has your service approach changed as the company has grown? Not really. Huber’s service vision has always been to provide a personable and friendly service to all customers regardless of their background, much like how you treat each other in a family. Treating everyone fairly is something my dad instilled from the beginning. We don’t look at customers thinking, *are they rich or are they just a helper?* We treat everyone the same, and that goes for how staff treat each other too.

Delivering good service used to be taught in-house through on-the-job training. Now we’re growing

at a pace where you have to set up systems and structures, so we hired a service consultant to formalise our processes and document our service philosophy. This makes service delivery more consistent and also gives staff a better understanding of what is expected.

We've always felt that our service has to match our product quality, so we've always looked for ways to improve. We now have handbooks and pocket-sized cards that staff keep with them at work. We conduct customer satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping, and we take most feedback seriously. We go through feedback from Facebook, TripAdvisor, surveys, and emails with our employees. Sometimes we bring up examples on our weekly debrief so everyone can learn from it.

Huber's is also known for its knowledgeable staff. Our kind of business is more service and knowledge-led: you can buy a good quality product from us and it can turn out very bad if you don't know how to cook it well, so it's important customers are educated.

Staff education is key to customer education. We try to find people with cooking knowledge first, and from there we teach them the butchery skills. We impart knowledge through product training sessions and in-house briefings. We also test the butchers in small groups by asking them questions like "where do I find the mayonnaise?" Our butchers also need to know these answers because these are questions that customers often ask.

Every fortnight, we send out a video to all employees on a product we have, like a particular pasta that we sell and what's good about it. Every other fortnight, we send out a short video on service training, like how to tackle a certain problem, for example.

Service is such a big part of Huber's DNA. How have you translated that online? My father was very against selling online. He always felt that people would want to see the freshness of the meat before buying it, but I felt that once your brand is strong enough, people buy online because of convenience and trust.

With online platforms, you tend to lose that service component, that human interaction. I thought for a long time of how to replace that. We started with a platform that is, of course, easy to navigate and shop over and over again. We don't have a butcher there for customers to direct questions to, so we created a *meathesaurus* section that has loads of information on meat, meat cuts, and how to best handle, store, and cook our meats. We also have a recipe section where we share tried and tested recipes categorised by the type of meat.

We then created a YouTube channel where customers can watch videos on alternative steak cuts and learn how to sharpen knifes, how to cook meat etc. These videos tie in very well with our online service delivery because it gives a face to the brand.

Most recently, we added a new section to the website — Ask the Experts. We know customers can have burning questions about butchering or cooking, so what we've done is to create a panel of experts within their respective cuisines to help answer questions. If the question isn't very private, the answer is then shared publicly on our forum for others to read and hopefully learn from.

How do you keep your team committed to Huber's vision? We have our service trainings and structures. For example, I regularly meet with teams to listen to issues and align our thinking and actions. Employee salaries have been increasing so

> *"Our kind of business is more service and knowledge-led: you can buy a good quality product from us and it can turn out very bad if you don't know how to cook it well, so it's important customers are educated."*

I believe that keeps them happy and motivated. We also have loyalty programmes to reward long service and an appraisal system where good workers receive a bigger share of the bonus payout.

Of course, we instill a strong family culture here which makes for a warm and happy working environment. It's just about treating people well, right down to the dishwasher and cleaner. When staff see how the bosses treat people, they're appreciative and treat you and each other nicely. It rubs off on everyone. ✦

BUILDING A BETTER BUSINESS WITH RETENTION POLICIES

Richard Huggins of Rabbit Carrot Gun comments on Singapore's manpower challenges and his radical solutions.

Richard Huggins is owner-operator of Rabbit Carrot Gun, a casual restaurant-café established in 2012 in the Joo Chiat neighbourhood. He also runs British pub, The Trenchard Arms, one door over, as well as boutique hotel accommodation on the upper floors.

It is easy to label Richard a straight-talking dissident — the man is unapologetically critical about the future of Singapore service, particularly in the F&B industry: "The challenge is straightforward: there is no manpower. Singaporeans are not willing to do these jobs; they're not interested in doing these jobs. And I don't blame them — it's hard work. Why would you bother doing hard work when you don't need to? But if you can't employ for it otherwise, then service here will decline, and as a business owner, the pressure increases appreciably each year."

While he can appear brusque, Richard's leadership style belies his vitriol. Midway through this interview, an employee stops by to cheekily comment, "Just want to say I miss you!" Richard guffaws and explains. "We try to create an atmosphere where staff aren't afraid to have a bit of fun with each other. It's super important."

Richard, tell us about the business. From a pair of derelict shophouses, we created Rabbit Carrot Gun as a restaurant café and The Trenchard Arms, a British pub, next door.

Honestly, this is the hardest thing I've done in my life. I've been a professional rugby player; a nightclub bouncer; I ran Microsoft's online services division for five and a half years; I got divorced; I got remarried. Let me tell you, divorce doesn't even come close!

Service here is a little unorthodox. Frequent, friendly, and local is what we're aiming for in terms of brand positioning. I would call our service unashamedly irreverent.

We may occasionally appear quite rude to our customers because we're almost overly familiar with them, but I mean, we're professional about it. Obviously, we can't act this way with just anybody. We recently had feedback that someone felt like underappreciated because nobody was talking to him, while everyone else was exchanging high-fives and jokes.

We get it, but our response to that is clear: in the same way you are rewarded by flying regularly with an airline or spending on a credit card, we can only treat you in the way you would like if you visit regularly. That's the only way we can get to know your preferences! We can't do that when you first arrive, but we will take the time to get to know you so we can welcome you back.

We're all about staying true to the core of who we are. The point at which you try to be all things to all people — you fail.

You've described the lack of manpower as the single greatest challenge to business owners here. What are some of your solutions to this? Service has the potential to be wonderful — if you can get it. Customers can only get great service if we retain people, because only then can we teach them our systems, processes, and brand values that we're trying to build our business with.

I'll be honest: Singaporeans do not want to work in this industry. It is a cultural thing — you take jobs in F&B as a stopgap solution, not to build a career. There is no foresight. We've just had Chinese New Year, so immediately every Singaporean we have has resigned, taken their bonus, and taken another job where they will get an extra five cents an hour.

While that sounds negative, the positive side is it forces our leadership team to think about how we differentiate. A traditional business is based on command and control: key information is retained by leadership while workers know little about financial indicators. The front-of-house staff know our customers best; similarly, our back-of-house staff know our suppliers best. Our approach is to operate Open Book Management by involving everyone in decisions that drive improvement and growth.

If you give employees a reason to care, you have a better chance of retention. The pillars we use to try to achieve quality food and service are: giving the team a reason to care; being transparent with them; and giving them skin of the game.

Most places charge service tax, right? We don't, and because we don't do that, we get quite a lot of tips, 100% of which go to the staff. So already they are incentivised to turn up, and if they can take home an additional 10% just from tips, they're probably going to care more about each customer's experience.

Our business is very clearly mapped out. We close the business once a month and go through a full business review with everyone on the team. Transparency starts there: if you ask the pot-washer what our P&L is, he would be able to tell you. It's called open-book management. Everyone knows the core elements of the business — the cost of goods, overall labour costs — but they don't know personal information like individual salaries.

The last strand is giving the skin of the game. Now, say they feel we need an extra person in the kitchen. I don't make that decision; we allow them to make it. They know their bonus is tied to their productivity — they know what the margins are and what their bonuses will be. If they want more time on their hands, they can choose to hire, but if they want more money, they can choose to work harder. They have control over what they want and how we operate as a whole.

You also have a guest chef programme. Can you tell us about that? One of the biggest areas you can differentiate on in Singapore is through quality: quality of food and quality of service. Constant and never-ending improvement (CANI) is a core value for us — we were thinking about how to take our food to a different level, and I was dining in a restaurant cafe in Melbourne where the cuisine, brand, and staff approach was in line with the vision I had to take Rabbit Carrot Gun forward. So I introduced myself to their owner, and we literally drew up the plan for this on a napkin.

Their head chef visited three times and took baby steps to train the team. We reduced the menu by 40% but improved everything else by 50%. Since then we've had outstanding chefs from the UK and Bangkok visit.

Each guest chef is effectively an additional tutor for our culinary team and has become a valuable part of our retention strategy. I've always said to the team: if you're earning and learning, we have twice the chance of keeping you. But if it's just about money, you're going to find other places to work at.

The programme forms part of our approach to CANI and supports both our PR and marketing, as well as that of our guest chefs. We've had tremendous feedback from our customers. While our business can be undercut on price, we punch a long way above our weight with regards to differentiation and affordability on quality. ✦

INVENTIVE SOLUTIONS

Alson Teo of Stamfles International reflects on inventing the iKook and why automation is essential to scale.

Alson Teo is deeply patriotic. It took him 13 years to successfully develop the iKook, the world's first automated poultry cooking device that can cook poultry in different ways. His motivation? A desire to bring Singapore's famed chicken rice around the world — without the risk of compromised quality or chef inconsistencies.

Alson has a colourful, albeit complicated, past. He began his first food company, Stamfles Food Management, in 1997, which specialised in institutional catering. When the company was sued by an international conglomerate, Alson was forced to sell majority shareholding to an international food group, using the money to finance both legal procedures and the development of iKook. The court eventually ruled in favour of Stamfles. Today, Alson's portfolio has expanded to include Roost, a poultry-focused restaurant that exclusively uses the iKook, and Easy Gourmet, an on-demand home catering service that leverages his institutional catering expertise.

The iKook eventually amounted to an estimated S$1 million in R&D, single-handedly funded by Alson. He says of the process, "Now that we've succeeded in building the iKook, it's easy to celebrate, but I was once viewed as a trouble-maker. The government was perfectly happy to give me money to buy solutions, but there was nothing like what I needed! They told me it was too risky if I wanted to create an entirely new product. What if I failed? What if someone else could do it better? I told them this would be the world's first, but they thought I was siao (crazy). So we funded the invention ourselves. It was very painful, but it wasn't hard. The hardest part was to keep going when nobody believed in our vision."

Alson, tell us about your entrepreneurship journey. I started my career working for a foreign company, which made me realise that outsiders view Singapore as a very small market. Our team worked wholeheartedly for them, but every time we faced a challenge, the company would want to quit the market. After seven years, I had to take a break because I was so disillusioned.

It wasn't my grand plan to become an entrepreneur. I received a call from someone my former company had unsuccessfully pitched an account with. I referred him to my ex-colleague but the ex-client offered me the contract instead. He said to just try it for a year, so I started Stamfles.

We grew our clientele very quickly and started working with big names like M1 and Hitachi. A few years later, we won a big account with a foreign conglomerate, which eventually resulted in a lawsuit that dragged on for four years. They accused us of things like stealing trade secrets, and they were smart in their approach: they chose not just to go after me but also eight of my colleagues. There were a total of 48 suits worth $250,000 each. I decided to indemnify all of them, but in order to do that I had to sell my company to another international conglomerate.

To be honest, it's not difficult to make money. It's difficult to be a leader. A leader must stand up and take ownership, and to me, it was one man's life for eight others.

You turned to automation early on. Many years ago, I wanted to expand to China, but I realised I couldn't replicate what we were doing because my business model was totally chef-dependent.

Don't forget: at that time I was also up against big companies, and I saw them entering China but losing money for 10 years — all for market share! I didn't have deep pockets like them or their same brand status. I couldn't compete on the lower end because it's impossible to beat the Chinese pricing. So how could I be different?

With the human inconsistencies of chefs, I realised the only way forward was to use automation to scale the business. We spent 13 years to build the iKook, a machine that is literally a master chef. iKook can control everything from temperature to timing so the texture and flavour is always consistent. It can replace chefs, but of course the chefs don't like to hear that.

Why is consistency so important to you? Because differentiating on food quality is necessary, but the only way to ensure we can do that is to maintain consistency. We are priced in the mid-range but our consistency is always beyond that. That's what service excellence is, right? Meeting and exceeding the basic expectations of your customers.

> *"Consistency is one way to create customer satisfaction, but to build customer loyalty, you must show your customers you care about them — you must win them over emotionally."*

Consistency is one way to create customer satisfaction, but to build customer loyalty, you must show your customers you care about them — you must win them over emotionally. For example, it's tough to achieve great flavour for local food without MSG, but we wanted to create meals that we will take home to our families, so we cook everything without MSG — even our soup is made with superior chicken stock boiled from scratch! We show customers we care about the flavours and their health.

You have extensive industry experience. What do you think of our service culture? A few years ago, I opened a restaurant called SOUPerlicious with a few outlets across Singapore. It was very difficult to manage because of all the overhead costs, so I made the painful decision of spending money to close all our stores. Many entrepreneurs are focused on saving face, but I think as a leader, you must think of your people and long-term growth.

The reality is our service industry is lacking because service providers are faced with day-to-day constraints like high rental, high manpower costs, and inability to find staff. As a nation, we are quick to pick up new ideas and adapt to technology, but we're not like Japan. We lack their deep-rooted service culture. People here don't take pride in service. Customers are also not appreciative or thankful of customer service.

In order to improve Singapore's standard of service, we have to first attract the right talent. I don't believe that relaxing the foreign worker quota is the way forward — that will never happen because it will bring about so many social issues. But I do think attracting the right talent comes down to the public sector: until they start channelling energy to change this national image of service, it will always be seen as something you do because you *bo bian* (have no choice). People need to be given an incentive to see the industry as a career choice.

These problems will not be fixed overnight. It will take a long time. I believe the best way to manage these problems is to control as much as possible: keep your physical stores to two or three maximum and channel your expertise online. Customers today want more personalised service, more options, quicker response, and they want service providers to keep in touch with them. Going online allows you to reach out to B2B and B2C customers 24/7 and forgo rental and overhead costs. I think this is an important way forward. ✦

DRESSING THE FUTURE

Christopher Halim and Raena Lim of Style Theory review the importance of appropriate automation and necessary systems in growing a young company.

Christopher Halim and Raena Lim are on a mission to change the future of fashion consumption. Co-founders of Style Theory — a dress rental subscription service — the enterprising duo has propelled their business from a mere Instagram experiment to an inventory of over 15,000 dresses, thousands of subscribers, and a team of 70 in two countries in just two years.

In spite of how young the business is, Christopher and Raena speak with levelled maturity of their vision for Style Theory. They are bright and conversant about systems, structure, and processes. They are also disruptors at heart: hungry for change, motivated by impact, and never happy to leave well enough alone. As Raena anecdotally puts it: "If people request for a square table, we will challenge them by asking why they need a table, why it has to be square, even whether or not it needs legs. We need to see if what they think they need or know is still applicable. Only by challenging what we know and are used to, can we make the changes required in this evolving world."

How did Style Theory come about? Raena (R): It started when Chris pointed out how my incessant complaints about how I had nothing to wear was illogical when I had a wardrobe bursting with clothes. We decided to dig deeper and realised 80% of my clothes hadn't been touched in the past year. For someone with a finance background, it was obviously not a smart investment. We spoke with around 30 friends and realised none of them utilised more than 50% of their wardrobe. That's when we realised how inefficient shopping was and we wanted to change it.

Back in January 2016, we didn't know if the idea would work, so Chris and I decided to test it out with a website we had put together in a day. We set up an Instagram account and started testing by advertising with $10 a day. Our goal was to have 500 women within the month express interest in the idea. By the end of January, we had 1,500 women on our waitlist.

We officially launched in May 2016 with an inventory for 150 women. Within a month, we were fully subscribed. Today we have thousands of subscribers in Singapore and thousands more on our waitlist. We also just launched in Jakarta to a few hundred subscribers.

And you have such a large team now! How would you describe yourselves as bosses? Christopher (C): We're the founders but we don't think of ourselves as empowered to make decisions for the company. Scaling a company successfully requires more than just good performance. On a certain scale, it's important to have processes and structures in place so the team will have the tools and channels for them to track, communicate, and run faster.

How have you done that? C: When the company was small, I would just share — informally — about what we were doing and the team was aligned. As we grew, people started saying they were losing touch with what was going on in the company. Passing on information was almost like playing a game of broken telephone.

So now we do a fortnightly all hands meeting, where we share key updates and have Q&A sessions for anyone to ask anything. We also have a monthly one-on-one with our direct subordinates, and our direct subordinates have one-on-ones with their subordinates.

R: That way, no one will be left out. We've started to define our north star, core values, and develop a more formalised way of evaluating people's performances. At the beginning, how and why we do things was straightforward — there wasn't a need to put it down in pen and paper. But now, especially with teams in two countries, the Style Theory way needs to be more visible to provide clarity and consistency.

C: Looking back, one key thing we did was to hire strong people who believed in our vision. We learnt from their experience and adapted it.

R: Yeah, for example, our head of people operations came in to set up our performance management system. We also provided the management team with adequate training so they can implement the same for people in their team.

What about your customers? How would you describe your service approach? C: We try our best to make sure we never let our customers down.

R: I remember emailing all our customers when we started to ask why they had joined us and how we could serve their needs. The conversation continued from then and many of our customers continue to play an active role in shaping the wardrobe you see today. Our growth has always been driven heavily by our customers. They spoke about us at the events they organised and brought us on as speakers to gain more exposure. Some of them even gave us free consultations on marketing and branding.

This is how we see it: Style Theory is creating something that hasn't existed in this region. We're doing something people are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with, so customer service is critical to allow them to understand, believe in, and feel comfortable with us. We make sure we can answer all our customers' doubts to make them comfortable.

What else have you done to increase their comfort level? C: We started with customer education through our web, user interface, and social media. We also made sure to be readily available to clarify questions people might have by adopting a chat application as our main mode of communication, instead of calling through a phone service, which can be time-consuming. Getting help should be as easy as texting a friend. Our chat service is manned on weekends and at night to make sure there's always someone to offer recovery options.

We support the conversations in each market locally at the moment. We like this model because teams based locally will have a better context to the problems — like if it's raining or if a place is far away — and will be able to build stronger relationships with our customers. Being in touch with small things can help customers feel like we understand them.

R: To us, customer service is beyond problem solving. It is about building trusted relationships and being able to pre-empt what customers require before problems arise. For example, if the marketing team is looking to acquire new customers who are younger, customer service will identify potential concerns of these customers to make sure the team can serve their needs once they are onboarded.

C: I think the best way to increase customer loyalty is to listen to feedback and continuously work on improvements that can add value to their lives. At the end of the day, our business has grown so much because of how close we are on the ground and how focused we are in making our customers happy.

Administration Building, 81 Victoria Street, Singapore 188065
Tel: (65) 6828 0111 | Email: ise@smu.edu.sg | Website: ise.smu.edu.sg