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Designing small successes

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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.



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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. ♦