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### Selling service in retail

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## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

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*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.*  
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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. ✦