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Handmade with love

Anna LIM

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Handmade with *Love*

Anna Lim of The Soup Spoon discusses the importance of investing in staff engagement and keeping true to your brand DNA.



Anna Lim, Co-Founder of The Soup Spoon, is a woman of formidable vision. In 16 years, Anna and her co-founders have taken The Soup Spoon from a single outlet in Raffles City to a whopping 26 outlets around Singapore, diversifying the brand to include dining concepts such as The Grill Knife; The Salad Fork; The Handburger; and The Soup Spoon Union. As if that hasn't kept them busy enough, The Soup Spoon has also explored regional franchising, subscription services, and now even stocks its retail line of soup pouches in overseas supermarkets.

To get to where they are today, Anna and her team have invested in structures, processes, and technology. What hasn't wavered, however, is their commitment to

their product: wholesome, nutritious, handmade soups for everyone. As Anna puts it, "The first restaurant in the world was actually a soup restaurant. People used to go to restaurants for nourishment because soup is something that restores the body. That's where the word 'restaurant' comes from — to restore, to nourish. If you go to my production facilities today, you'll see that we're actually cooking how you cook at home, only with bigger pots and kettles. If you read our ingredients, there's nothing inside that you won't recognise. We don't have stabilisers, which is why our soups still taste homemade. This is such an important part of what we believe in."



Anna, why the focus on soups?

Basically, we saw a gap in the market that we could fill. Sometimes you just want soup, but in those days you wouldn't be able to go to a fine dining restaurant and order only soup because soup was always an appetizer, not a main course. Back when I was a student studying in Australia, a lot of us ate the hearty stew range of canned soups. It wasn't because it tasted good; it was because it was fast.

So we wanted to create something that would replace these unhealthy soups at home. I think that's one thing that we've always been passionate about: using no MSG, no preservatives.

And it's not just about wholesome cooking. Your tagline is The World In One Kitchen.

Yes, that started with our rebranding a few years ago. At the end of the day, there's a story behind every soup and soups are very dear to most people. It's often connected to a particular memory. We're always trying to draw out that inspiration and those stories.

We do world campaigns with different partners in countries like Japan, Brazil, Bhutan, where we travel to different regions, experience their food, and return home to create a series of specials on what we've seen and tasted. We started doing this about four years ago because content marketing was pretty popular so we decided to produce digital magazines for our customers to really understand the story behind the soups we've created.

Do you consider product range important in your service approach?

I think your product can get lost in translation when your range is too large because having too many products will affect the service given. You must remember that the training is very tough on staff if you have a lot of products. If you have too many products, your staff will be forced to remember a lot of things.

When we revamp our menu once every four or six months, we spend a lot of time retraining the staff. So, because we have more outlets now, we do things like A/B testing where we get the staff to engage our customers and seek feedback on the new soups. This way we reduce the potential problem of customers not liking something.

How else have you designed your dining experience?

It's all about the people, their communication, the product, and your place — everything has to work together.

When it comes to how we've designed the store, we've mimicked the home experience where the dining area is always an extension of the kitchen.

We now have smaller spaces where the kitchen opens to the seating area, and that helps our customers connect to this idea of coming home to have soup, and associating The Soup Spoon dining experience with that homely warmth.

With our soup ingredients, it's all about being handmade with love — our vegetables are roughly cut, our chicken is in uneven chunks. These details remind our customers of home.

You know, we have our external ambassadors — customers who say that they love the soups — and we spend a lot of branding and marketing dollars to drive that. But there's another part to the equation: our staff. They are our internal ambassadors — they promote and sell the brand by talking to customers. We used to make our staff wear uniforms, but we decided to do away with them because soup is so personal! We didn't want customers to see us as formal chefs; we wanted them to feel like we're just cooks at home.





I think the service we deliver must be earnest; you cannot tell your staff to recommend the most expensive thing on the menu just to make money. I always tell them to talk to customers about their personal favourites. That's more important because customers will feel our warmth not just with the bowl of soup they get but also with our service.

Is there a formal training process?

Yes, there is. We are an approved training organisation and have both classroom and on-the-job training. Before they start with us, they go through the classroom training, and at the store we have a buddy system, so they have someone to guide them. We used to make them memorise the ingredients in the soup, but we realised most people would fall off training like that. It's so tough! So I think it's more important to have people who are passionate about your vision and want to "infect" their colleagues with their energy instead.

We're more like family here. We have this breakfast meeting called Rookie Day to welcome the newcomers. Most of the time, people who work at the store don't really know the people in HQ. It's like if your system is down and you call the IT guy, right? In most cases you've never seen this IT guy! So at Rookie Day, the HR and HQ staff will cook breakfast and serve it to our new staff, and after that we

play service-orientated games. It's fun but we also get to test service.

I totally believe in this breakfast thing — I think staff engagement is so important. We even turned the breakfast into a challenge where the different teams would use our soups to create different food, sort of like MasterChef. We've since published some of their recipes on our platforms for customers to check out, like when we had one team make chawanmushi from our Tokyo Chicken Stew, and another turn Mushroom Soup into pasta sauce.

At the end of the day, it's important that staff don't feel that they are just a number. Everyone counts. Everyone has a part to play here. We need this to be instilled in everybody. 🍲

“It's all about the people, their communication, the product, and your place — everything has to work together.”