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Scaling for the masses

Junting ANG

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Scaling for the Masses



Ang Junting of Hai Sia Seafood traces the journey of updating a traditional business in a demanding trade to attract and retain talent.

Although Ang Junting, second-generation owner of Hai Sia Seafood, had regularly spent his school holidays working at Jurong Fishery Port, he never harboured ambitions of joining the family business. It was a conversation he shared with a veteran chef while pursuing his culinary career in China that spurred him to return. Says Junting, “The chef told me if I were to continue working in China, I would have a couple of years in the industry, but if I were to go back, I would be continuing my family’s legacy of over 40 years.”

A cursory Google search of Hai Sia will yield articles of how Junting has revolutionised the business, but he is quick to refute the claim. “I won’t say that I made a lot of changes; I just made a lot of updates. The company was running fine but we updated it conceptually to create better work hygiene for everyone — in terms of a cleaner and better environment, proper compensation and benefits, and career growth. What we do is tough work so we try to take care of our people.”

Junting, can you give us an overview of Hai Sia?

We're essentially fishmongers. 70 years ago, my grandfather was a street peddler along Mohammed Sultan Road but was forced to move into government-built wet markets. My father started helping him at the age of 13. As time went by, my father saw opportunities to supply to ship chandlers and Chinese restaurants. They continued to operate the hawker stall but eventually moved the business to supply seafood to other businesses.

And Hai Sia now sells to the end consumer (B2C) too, right?

Yes, but our business-to-business segment (B2B) is still core — there are restaurants and hawker stalls we've been serving for close to 30 years. It brings a big smile to my face when I hear people talk about a fish soup being great and I can proudly say that they are my customer. We also supply to airline caterers and popular restaurants spanning across different cuisines. Another competency we developed in 2018 is salmon sashimi preparation where we supply to Japanese restaurants and places serving poké.

In a way, it's interesting because we've gone full circle by introducing B2C — my father used to tell me that when he was working in the wet market, he would have customers from all ethnic groups and ages requesting for different parts of the fish. Nowadays, some people look for fillets, others want steaks, and some others want sliced fish. That's why we offer different cuts under the Serve range with online grocers like RedMart and Amazon. We're still doing the same thing my grandfather and father did, but we present it in a different way.

Was it difficult to convince your father about starting a B2C arm?

Super! He said, "What kind of business is this? We're a wholesaler — why do you want to pack our fish in 240g packets?" The thing is, people don't just want to buy fish; they want their meats, fruits, vegetables. I'm not in logistics so I don't have many trucks to deliver around Singapore. If we did this on our own, our minimum order would be \$100 or \$150, and small families don't eat that much fish. So working with online grocers allows us to tap on an efficiency that we can't provide independently.



B2C sales make up only 8% of your revenue. Why invest time in things like organising tours around the fishery for the public when this market isn't a core part of your business?

The way we see it, Serve is predominantly an online product, so it's difficult for us to have customer touchpoints. These tours are a way for us to get people interested in what we do and gain credibility with them.

We also never charge for the tour and by doing that, we have more freedom to adapt to the crowd. If I get more questions, I talk more; if the crowd just wants to buy fish, then I'll just give a brief introduction. The most important thing is for them to get what they want. It's not for me to achieve the objective of educating the world.





What's your service philosophy?

When you look at management philosophies, there's usually a clear strategy of the culture you're trying to build. But it's been very organic for us — I'm relatively young and inexperienced in managing a company, so what I think is a great business direction for us this year might be different next year.

The most important thing for us is to be humble. A fishmonger is a custodian. We're not fishermen — we don't own boats; we're not fish farmers — we don't farm fish. None of our products belong to us, which is also why our consumer brand is 'Serve' — we see it as a service to the fishermen, fish farmers, and the families who buy our products. We make it simpler for people to consume seafood at a great value, so for us, the most important thing is focusing on people. We consciously take care of three groups of people — our team, our suppliers, and our customers.

First: our team. They spend so much time at work, so how can we improve their productivity so that for the time they don't spend at work, they can spend rich, meaningful lives with their families? We work to actively better their lives by helping them grow. For example, I personally don't subscribe to the whole family business idea of hiring a lot of family members. There are companies who have worked it out, but from an employee's perspective, I think it makes a very big difference knowing that the boss's sister is the finance manager, for example. That puts a cap on development and growth because nobody can

aspire to go beyond an assistant manager role. But when you hire people with different backgrounds and experiences, the ideas they have are a lot more exciting, varied, and relevant.

With our suppliers, we always remember that relationships are very important. Singapore is often not their core market because no matter how well things sell in Singapore, it's going to be a very small fraction of their sales. So we have to give them good reason to do it and that means doing their products justice and sometimes helping to build demand for certain products. We also frequently visit our suppliers to show them we're sincere about working with them.

And finally: our customers. They have faith that we're a good, honest supplier, which means they trust we will stand by our products. I generally try not to think so much about who my customers and products of tomorrow are, but how we can be better at it no matter who or what they might be.

At the end of the day, we're super mass market. People ask me for great lobsters and I tell them they're looking in the wrong place. Out of 365 days in a year, I take care of your 300 days. It might not sound sexy, but that's who we are: your everyday fishmonger. 🍷



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