

# BOON

**Stories of Entrepreneurs from Temasek Polytechnic**

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# FOREWORD BY MR TED TAN

*Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Industry Clusters  
Enterprise Singapore*

Entrepreneurship has played a big role in the economic history of Singapore. Indeed, there are many prominent pioneers after whom our streets and landmarks are named - like Lim Nee Soon, Seah Eu Chin, Manasseh Meyer, Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied, Naraina Pillai, and Andre Filipe Desker.

Today, we are proud to have our very own home-grown businesses making their mark beyond our shores. From local food favourites like Old Chang Kee to technology companies that are the likes of Razer, we are seeing more Singapore brands setting footprints internationally.

The spirit of enterprise in Singapore continues to flourish. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, there were some 4,800 startups in 2015, compared to just 1,700 in 2003.

Enterprise Singapore works together with many of our partners to develop a conducive business environment for enterprises to help them grow and break new ground. The formation of this new agency, created from the merger of SPRING Singapore and IE Singapore, will mean even better support for enterprises and entrepreneurs.

The Institutes of Higher Education form one group of partners that we work closely with. I am heartened to see that Temasek Polytechnic (TP) plays an active role to champion various activities to promote the spirit of enterprise among its students and alumni. For example, the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Department spearheaded an IdeaBank project, an online idea repository platform, which SPRING has supported. To ignite greater interest towards entrepreneurial ventures to share business successes with students, TP has also organised a series of seminars and workshops on entrepreneurship which have been well-received.

“ The **spirit of enterprise** in Singapore continues to flourish. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, there were some **4,800 startups in 2015**, compared to just 1,700 in 2003. ”

This book shares the journeys and achievements of TP’s alumni entrepreneurs. SPRING is delighted to have supported some of them in their ventures, which you can read about in the following pages.

I hope that these stories will inspire the next generation of aspiring entrepreneurs to take the leap of faith and build more global brands from Singapore. I wish TP all the best in its efforts to educate and unleash the potential of our young, bright minds for their future success.

Let’s work together to help our entrepreneurs to *Start Small, Think Big and Act Fast* and grow into globally successful enterprises.



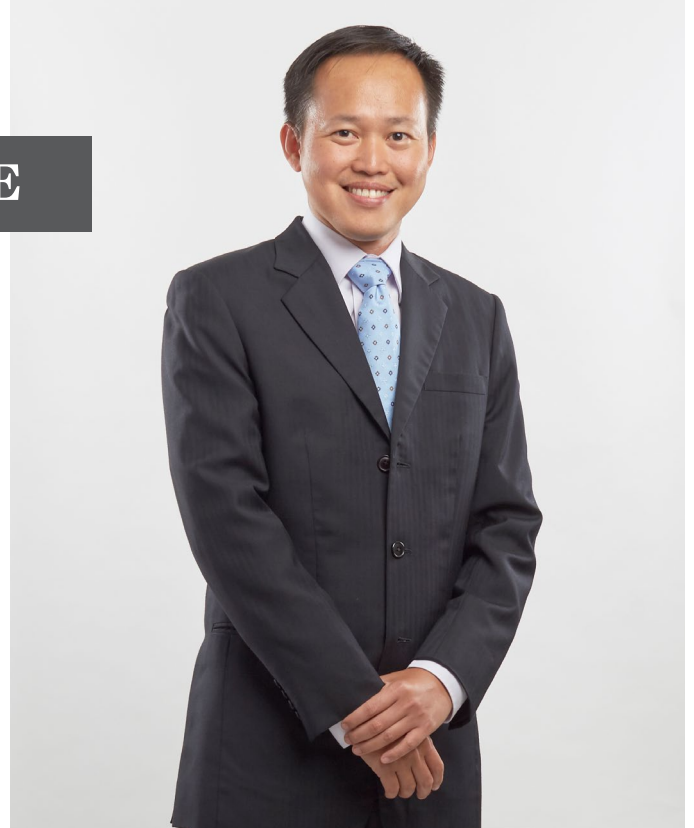
## PRINCIPAL'S MESSAGE

According to a Temasek Polytechnic (TP) entrepreneurship survey published in 2017, 38.3% of TP students desire to be an entrepreneur at some point in their career. The high aspiration in starting up comes from the entrepreneurial drive of our students in pursuing their areas of interest and a preference for freedom in determining their career growth.

While it is heartening that many of our students aspire to be entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship education is more than just starting businesses. It is about overcoming the fear of failure, pushing boundaries, creative problem-solving, capitalising on opportunities and persevering to fruition. This entrepreneurial and innovative mindset will benefit students in life and in any career that they choose.

In TP, we help students nurture their spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship (I&E) through the formal curriculum and by building a vibrant eco-system to support the entrepreneurial activities of our students and alumni. We offer a core module on I&E for all students and organise workshops and seminars featuring entrepreneurs and those who have been innovative in developing new products or services in established companies.

We provide experienced mentors and industry experts who guide our students and alumni on their entrepreneurship journeys. We help them in their relevant domains. We have set up a makerspace facility for students to tinker innovatively. We provide incubation spaces to support our alumni in their entrepreneurial ventures. We leverage on Pollinate, the first joint incubator established by Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore Polytechnic and TP at Block 71 in One North.



**Mr Peter Lam**  
*Principal & CEO*

The stories of our alumni entrepreneurs in this book will demonstrate what it takes to be an entrepreneur. Some of them started as early as their polytechnic days while others chose this path as a mid-career switch. I want to congratulate all of them for their business successes and, more importantly, for embodying the spirit of enterprise by taking a bold step forward to start their entrepreneurship journey.

I hope you will enjoy reading our alumni entrepreneurs' stories. They have paved the way for the next generation of young entrepreneurs to follow in their footsteps, and we are proud of their achievements.



# What Does It Take To Be An Entrepreneur?

## INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever wondered what does it take to be an entrepreneur? The word “*entrepreneurship*” is fascinating. Even though it’s just one word, it has multiple meanings as defined by different people.

To some, it means taking risks and doing something that hasn’t been done before. For others, entrepreneurship is a “*last resort*”; the final option to pursue for a livelihood when all else fails. “*Entrepreneurship*” might be one of the most feared words in the dictionary. It requires leaving one’s comfort zone, risking everything and stepping up to take the lead. The idea of pursuing entrepreneurship sends them the jitters as it shakes up their sense of safety, security and stability.

The title of this book was inspired by those who dared to take this journey. **BOLD** is a compilation of twenty stories from Temasek Polytechnic alumni entrepreneurs who courageously took the first step and ventured into the unknown. Besides recognising their business achievements and celebrating their successes, the focus of this book is to commend them for their courage to go against the tide, and turn their ideas into reality. These stories reveal their entrepreneurial spirit, their driving force behind their actions, and how they overcame all odds to build their businesses.

Without further ado, let the following chapters begin the journey in uncovering the entrepreneurial spirit these individuals possess and how they harnessed the various attributes to conquer the obstacles that came their way.



*“Creativity is intelligence*

*having fun”*

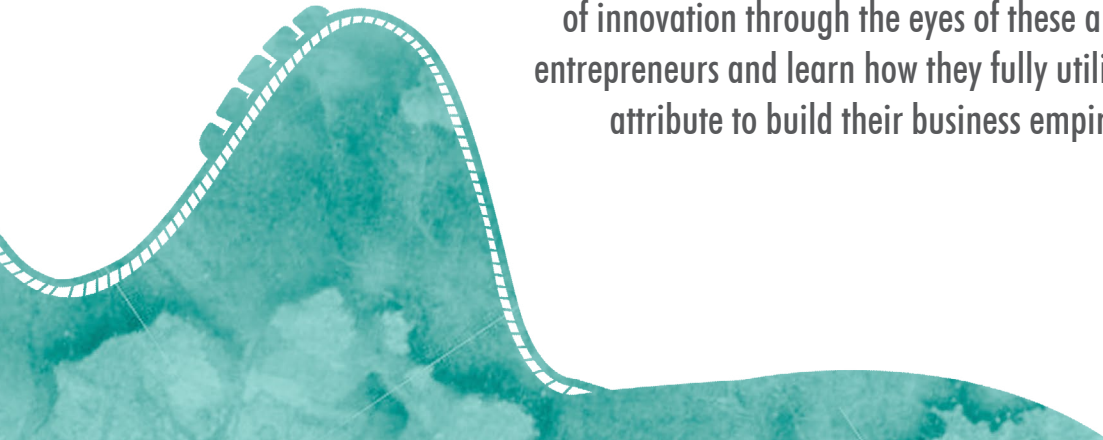
**IN**

# NOVATIVE

**Innovation** – the spark that ignites the fire from within.

It can be something as simple as discovering an idea or solving a problem that exists in the market. Creativity is synonymous with innovation in the business world. *“Creativity is intelligence having fun.”*

Let's kick-start our exploration of the meaning of innovation through the eyes of these alumni entrepreneurs and learn how they fully utilised this attribute to build their business empire.



# Going Digital

By Adam Low

Based in Singapore, Y Ventures Group is a data analytics driven e-commerce retailer and distributor. Capitalising on our data analytics capabilities, we partner with the world's leading brands to sell their products in multiple countries across various online marketplaces.

## Brotherhood Bond

It was back in 2002 when my younger brother had just completed his national service. We had a discussion at our flat's void deck and he told me he wanted to pursue his studies in USA. Although he had already secured a place in a local university, the course he wanted to study was only available in USA. I guess back then, it was every young boy's dream to study abroad. We both decided not to take on a study loan for his studies, so I signed on with the Singapore Armed Forces to support him financially. With a stable income, I was able to mortgage our house and got some cash to fund the first two years of his school fees.

While studying in USA, my younger brother called me one night and told me he found a platform where anybody can sell anything online. It was Amazon and they just got started with their online platform. At that time, e-commerce wasn't so popular in Asia so I had some reservations. But I had to think of a solution to fund the rest of his tuition fees. With the last S\$10,000 I had in my savings account, I bought some goods in Singapore and shipped them to him to sell online. Amazon paid us weekly so our initial capital of S\$10,000 slowly grew to S\$20,000, S\$30,000, and we continued to make profits ever since. Both of us started out as a reseller and we saw a huge opportunity in online retailing, especially as a distributor.

I founded the company in 2003 with my younger brother, and there are three parts to our business. The first segment is distribution. We help brands distribute to fifteen different countries on forty-two platforms. Currently, we're the only company in the world doing it. The second segment is big data. We collect and analyse data to know what are selling well. With the information, we can forecast demand for our products and spot pricing trends. The last segment is product development. We work with manufacturers to understand the market gaps, and if there are any products we can create to meet these needs.



Over the course of building our business, what validated our business model was when an American multinational company tasked us to market their products. This was a breakthrough because American companies rarely look for Asian companies to help them sell in their own country.

## Listing on the Singapore Stock Exchange

I was drinking coffee with a friend, telling him casually about my business. He found what we were doing in the online space very interesting. He highlighted it to the people in the Singapore Stock Exchange, who were very keen to bring us on board. We were a profitable company and there wasn't yet any technology company listed on our local exchange.

Everything happened extremely fast from then on. In a short span of two years since that conversation, we had to go through a tedious process of making our company more organised and structured. It felt like I had a reboot of my career. In the past, I only worked from nine to five, but ever since we've decided to get listed, I've been working more than twelve hours a day, from eight in the morning till nine at night.

The main challenge we faced during the listing process was restructuring. Since our business was mostly outside the Southeast Asian region, we had a lot of cross-border transactions with different entities in various countries. Subsequently, we had to convert these companies into subsidiaries and it definitely wasn't an easy process.

My parents were also concerned. They questioned my younger brother and I, *"If your company is making money, why do you need to get listed?"* All this while, our company's growth has been organic. That was the very first time we were getting money from investors. They felt that getting our company listed is too heavy a responsibility for us to shoulder. For the both of us, we know that in order for our company to grow, we had to take on some risks and added responsibilities. I told my younger brother, *"Even if we didn't manage to get listed in the end, it's still better for the company because everything will be in a better shape."*

The main reasons for us to get listed are for recruitment and increased awareness. As we work mostly with overseas brands, it'll be much easier for us to engage customers to expand in the Southeast Asian region when they know we are a listed company.

**"As an entrepreneur, there must be a constant hunger and the drive to succeed. Having the self-belief that whatever you do will be successful is also important."**



After going through this painstaking process, our company finally got listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange in July 2017 as the first technology e-commerce company with a market capitalisation of \$44 million.

“At its core, **innovation** is to help humans or traditional businesses become more **productive**.”

## Innovation and Entrepreneurship

As an entrepreneur, there must be constant hunger and the drive to succeed. Having the self-belief that whatever you do will be successful is also important. People have different reasons why they want to start businesses. It takes courage to put yourself out there to sell your idea and vision to the world.

When people ask me how they can get their company listed, I tell them not to think about that first. Focus on creating a business that's sustainable, because at the end of the day, it's all about sustainability.

At its core, innovation is to help humans or traditional businesses become more productive. Take our company for example. We've a current headcount of forty employees and our team is very lean. The reason why we can do so is that we tap on big data to help us do all the selling. We used a lot of tools developed over the years to help us sell better. I believe it'll still take some time before technology takes over most of our daily functions. When that happens, those who are not able to catch up fast enough will be left behind. That's why I'm a strong advocate in making sure that we're at the forefront of technology, putting it to good use to improve our lives.

# The Disrupted & The Disruptors

By Neeraj Sundarajoo  
& Keith Tan

Traditional methods of purchasing are prone to mistakes, time-consuming and involve a lot of paperwork. With Zeemart, we set out to design an easy-to-use purchasing experience for both buyers and suppliers, empowering businesses to make smarter purchasing.





Neeraj Sundarajoo (Left), Keith Tan (Right)

## Differences between an Entrepreneur and a Business Owner

**Neeraj:** *“The disrupted will never be the disruptor”*. Before going into detail to explain what this phrase means, we’ll have to differentiate between an entrepreneur and a business owner. When Keith and I first started, buzzwords such as “entrepreneurship” or “startups” were not as widely dropped as today. There was very little understanding of what entrepreneurship meant at that time, so I had to internalise what it really meant. Occasionally, I’ll even ask Keith, *“Are we really entrepreneurs?”* It took a while before understanding the differences between an entrepreneur and a business owner, but once you’ve gained clarity, the ability to innovate would be a breeze.

An entrepreneur has a good grasp of where possibilities and opportunities exist by spotting gaps in the market that no one is fulfilling. You’re not a solution looking for a problem, you’re really solving a problem. When you’re able to meet the needs of the existing market and even move the market by identifying certain trends, you are an entrepreneur.

A business owner on the other hand is just serving the market. Starting a business doesn’t automatically make you an entrepreneur. Yes, you’re enterprising and you want to start something of your own which is great, but in the true spirit of entrepreneurship, you’re not value-adding to the economy in an exponential way. You’re just like the rest of the business owners serving the market. To be a true-blue entrepreneur, you’ll have



**“Whichever industry you’re in, whether you’re a business owner or an entrepreneur, you’ll need to do better. It needs to be part of the company’s DNA. If not, you’ll be displaced because someone else will come in to do what you’re doing better.”**

– Neeraj Sundarajoo

to know what the market requires, sometimes even before they know it themselves and take the lead to address this need.

However, you can also be entrepreneurial and make things unique while serving your market. Since we’re in the F&B industry, we’ve noticed how F&B operators exercise creativity while serving their market. One example is Sakae Sushi. They were the ones who first brought in affordable Japanese food and introduced the conveyor belt concept. They did something different; it was not the typical Japanese style of restaurant that was available in Singapore then. Although the innovation leap may not be as huge in comparison to what a company such as Apple has done, it was really good innovation in their own space. With this, they were able to have their own building and did many other things which other restaurants were not able to do. This is one excellent example of how an existing business serving the market can take something that’s already there and come up with ways to do it differently.

## The Disrupted Will Never be the Disruptor

and it’s fine to begin by being enterprising and starting your own business, but you’ve got to be conscious of the fact that you need to evolve your business in time to come.

A potential pitfall of any business owner is the failure or resistance to continuously innovate. Take the automobile industry as an example. They’re an established industry and not many are willing to step up to innovate because they’re part of the industry. There was resistance among them to push for electric vehicles because they’re working closely with the oil companies. There’s an ecosystem in place and they didn’t want to challenge the status quo because everyone is happy with each other. This resulted in someone outside the industry coming in to disrupt the entire market and that’s what we see happening today. Tesla shook the industry up by questioning why cars must be built in a certain way. They’ve already created a product that’s much more appealing and even did pre-sales during their product launch, something unheard of in the automobile industry.

Another example is Kodak. It started an innovation unit and was actually the first to come up with digital media so you can do away with film. Unwittingly, Kodak shelved this idea because they felt it was going to cannibalise their film business. Eventually, someone else did it and Kodak lost their “*Kodak Moment*” to the world.

These are the main examples why the disrupted will never be the disruptors.

Of course, it’s definitely easier said than done. It’s great to start somewhere,

**“A company that places the consumer at the heart of whatever it does and makes decisions around this will be forced to innovate regularly in order to better serve its customers' growing needs and demands.”**

– Keith Tan



From the two examples, the take-home message is that whichever industry you're in, whether you're a business owner or an entrepreneur, you'll need to do better. It needs to be part of the company's DNA. If not, you'll be displaced because someone else will come in to do what you're doing better.

## A Customer-centric Approach

**Keith:** The secret sauce to being innovative is to put the consumer in the centre of everything you do. Design thinking is the common methodology used these days and adopting a Customer-centric approach is the key to constantly being innovative. When designing a product or service, always start by asking the question, “*Will this appeal to my customer?*” Strive to improve and delight the customer. Today, empathy is also very important. You need to know exactly what your consumers want.

Consumers today have information at their fingertips. It's not how good you say you are, but what your customers say about you. Having customers to endorse your own brand is the best way of advertising. A company that places the consumer at the heart of whatever it does and makes decisions around this will be forced to innovate regularly in order to better serve its customers' growing needs and demands.

Neeraj and I are childhood friends. I've known him since the age of ten. We were neighbours. We stayed in the same estate in Siglap, played soccer in our nearby park and even went to the same secondary school and polytechnic. During Neeraj's polytechnic days, he had the chance to explore a lot of things, including freelance work. As he wanted to do things in a more organised way, both of us decided to start a business together in 2002. This decision was more of doing something of our own, experimenting to see if we could go out there and make a difference. We want to stand on our own feet and build our business. We were constantly looking for ways to evolve the business, trying to outdo ourselves and we were looking to find a need in the market.

Although we started off purely as a hardware business, serving the market by building personal computers, we slowly moved into the web business. Eventually, we were able to brand ourselves as an interactive and digital agency, specialising in marketing and communications in the Internet space. In 2006, we were the first few companies that boldly claimed that creative business can be driven by Science. This won us the contract to run the entire creative content for eBay in Asia. In 2010, we were acquired by the world's largest advertising agency and in a short span of six to seven years, we exited our company while it was valued at an eight-figure amount to start a new company called Zeemart.



## Data as a Driving Force

By spending time on the ground to understand the current challenges F&B operators faced, we've identified three broad areas to explore, namely, rising cost of rent, manpower issues and procurement.

Unfortunately, the first two areas are beyond our control because they are largely dictated by external forces such as economic or governmental policies. However, there's a way to make the procurement process much more efficient. Based on our research, F&B operators spend about thirty to thirty-five percent of their revenue on procuring food items. What if we could help them save five to ten percent in this area by making the procurement process more efficient? Our solution would have a direct impact on their bottom line.

You'll be surprised that the F&B industry still operates in a very traditional fashion. Some of them are still making orders through the phone or a fax machine!

By playing on our strength and experience in using data as a driving force, we can add value by connecting them with logistics and warehousing services, and even understanding sales figures relative to their cost of goods. There's a huge window of opportunity when everything gets done on a single platform and that's what Zeemart is all about.

It's very timely for us to launch Zeemart now and our company has grown by leaps and bounds in less than a year. Aside from the government's push for companies to go digital, we've also observed the second generation taking over their family's F&B businesses. They're not used to the traditional way of procurement and are extremely receptive to the solution we provide.

Both Neeraj and I feel that we're ready to go out there again and do something even greater and more exciting. We're all set to make things happen and revolutionise this industry!

# Embracing Technology

By Lim Guo Hong

Design, develop and communicate! Founded by a team of young entrepreneurs, Corsiva Lab is Singapore's very own creative web design and digital marketing agency. The team seeks to help clients portray a professional brand image and generate qualified leads through digital marketing and web design.



## Information Technology

My favourite aspect of being an entrepreneur is the ability to solve problems. Chief problem solver is what I call myself! I solve problems every day and it's exhilarating. My goal is to find the best solutions to problems encountered, and as time goes by, I'll gain valuable experience to solve more complex problems.

Information Technology, or IT as most people call it, has always been my interest since young. It started as early as when I was ten years old. I was first taught how to use Microsoft Word, Excel and Office Frontpage in primary school. At that age, I was into playing an online game called *Neopets* and I wanted to create something similar. While using word art to do simple designs and Microsoft Powerpoint to create different slides, I managed to connect all the pages using a hyperlink and it became a mini game. Each page consisted of four questions and if

you got the answer right, you would move on to the next page. If you got the answer wrong, you would remain on the same page. The best part was distributing this mini game to my friends using a floppy disk. All of them were very impressed with my knack for creating games just from what we were taught in school.

In secondary school, I started to use my knowledge to earn money. I would create small websites to sell. On top of that, I became a support staff for forum creators and had to support them in creating turnkey website forums. This position led me to teach myself programming skills

**“We see ourselves as business builders, more specifically, solution builders. The team and I are constantly exploring new ideas and collaborations.”**

such as CSS and Javascript. I was very happy that people around me benefited from my IT skills and this reaffirmed my decision to stay in this field.

I did well for my “O” level examinations and my results could easily allow me to enter a junior college. Yet, I chose to pursue IT in Temasek Polytechnic because this was what I wanted. By entering the course with a better cut-off point as compared to the rest of the cohort, I was presented with a lot more opportunities. For instance, I interned at Microsoft Singapore and had the opportunity to join their Microsoft Student Partner programme. These golden opportunities kept my passion in IT going strong.

## An Online Car Rental Portal

With my co-founders back then, we explored what could be done with our knowledge in IT. After doing intensive research, we decided to start off by creating a property and car rental portal. In parallel, we approached Temasek Polytechnic’s Entrepreneurship Centre for mentorship and looked into exploring any grants we could tap on to help get our ideas off the ground.

We were advised to focus on building the car rental portal instead, because it had less competition and required less financial resources. Once the grant was approved, we started to hire our first employee, moved into a new office and eventually hired more employees. Things just took off from there.

The journey to build this business was a turbulent one. We faced many obstacles and made numerous mistakes that could have been avoided. We kept a positive spirit and faced problems head on. It really wasn’t easy and at times, we felt dejected. Gritting our teeth, we chose not to give up, because if we did, all our hard work would have gone to waste. Through trial and error, we view the challenges as new lessons and kept an open mind to constantly change, adapt and move forward.

From 2015 to early 2016, the revenue of our car rental portal was really good. The main reason was it coincided with the entry of Uber and Grab into the market. They were the catalysts that spurred the growth of our company. Our big break came when my co-founder and I realised this was actually an ideal time to sell the company. We looked around and found an interested buyer. After about two to three months of intense negotiations, we managed to sell our company for a sum of 1.6 million dollars!

**“To succeed as a start-up, you need an undying optimism to keep you going and a narrow service offering to focus on where your paying customers benefit the most.”**

After selling the company, I noticed people kept approaching me for help in the area of IT support and IT consultancy. My current co-founder had similar encounters with friends enlisting his help in marketing. That's why we decided to join forces and start our new company called Corsiva Lab.



## An IT and Development Agency

We're an IT and development agency with the simple concept of helping to build startups. Starting a business is not easy as there are too many functions to take care of. Our products and services help to address the business, IT and marketing aspects of any new company.

Right now, we're a team of eight and we've been spending the past nine months developing in-house products that will allow our internal marketing and IT teams to be self-sufficient. On top of customised solutions for our clients, these off-the-shelf products that we've developed on our own use a plug and play approach to help any startup or established company make their IT or marketing processes more effective and efficient. At Corsiva Lab, we see ourselves as business builders, more specifically, solution builders. The team and I are constantly exploring new ideas and collaborations.

## Taking the Company to Greater Heights

To be honest, I've never planned to be an entrepreneur. My childhood ambition was to work for the United Nations as I've always found their peace missions very meaningful. Everything started off from the opportunities I was presented with. Over the course of these years, things just happened one after another, leading me to where I am today. I'm thankful for the support and mentorship Temasek Polytechnic provided as well as the funds to launch our idea. That marked the starting point of us finally doing something we can call our own. I've been very lucky so far as my entrepreneurship journey is considered to be smooth sailing overall. Although it was challenging at times, I've learnt to be comfortable with this lifestyle and I've chosen to stick with it.

I'd like to borrow a quote from my mentor, Professor Francis Yeoh. He taught me this – *“To succeed as a startup, you need an undying optimism to keep you going and a narrow service offering to focus on where your paying customers benefit the most”*. This is what my team and I will continue to focus on to take our new company to greater heights.



# Moving with the Courier Times

By Elston Yee &  
Wong Yongjie

Courier specialises in on-demand delivery services with the touch of a button, making logistics simple for all by harnessing the power of new technologies and the sharing economy.



Wong Yongjie (Left), Elston Yee (Right)

manual shipping forms which I had to fill up. The actual delivery could take up to a few days or more, and I wouldn't know if the item had been delivered unless the buyer informed me.

I've known Yongjie for the past ten years. We've been in touch and he's the person I go to whenever I want to bounce off some ideas. Having more than seven years of experience in the logistics industry, I knew this process can be improved. Yongjie and I met for coffee at Ya Kun Century Square one day and I shared with him the frustrations I was experiencing. I wanted to explore if we could improve on the delivery experience. In 2014, Uber was up and rising so we thought, "Why not come up with a concept like Uber for deliveries?" That was how Qourier was founded.

**"When we first started out, whenever there were delivery requests, we had to do deliveries ourselves because we didn't have any Qouriers in the beginning."**

— Elston Yee

**Elston:** Carousell played a role in the founding of Qourier. When I left my corporate job to take a short break from work, I was selling things on Carousell. A buyer was keen to buy an item from me but he resides in the west while I live in the east. He was comfortable with transferring me the money, however, delivery was a hassle. At the post office, there was a snaking queue which I had to join and

Our initial project name was called "Send with post", but after some discussion with our initial investors, we came up with the name "Qourier" because it has the same pronunciation as "Courier" and we could get a domain name for it. From day one, we wanted to position our company as a global brand so it's a nice wordplay, and people can remember it easily. We are able to leverage on this name for other services such as "Qourier Local", "Qourier Air" and we can call our delivery agents "Qouriers".

## Juggling Between Demand and Supply

Our company is an online platform that connects businesses and individuals to a network of crowdsourced delivery agents for same day deliveries. Customers can post a delivery request on the browser or mobile application and a freelance crowdsourced Qourier will appear at their doorsteps to pick up the parcel and deliver it on the same day.

Due to the nature of our business model, the struggle was to find a balance between demand and supply. When we first started out, whenever there were delivery requests, we had to do the deliveries ourselves because we didn't have any Qouriers in the beginning. Both Yongjie and I didn't have cars so we had to walk or take public transport to fulfil the deliveries. It was extremely tiring, but definitely an enriching experience.

In order to recruit more Qouriers to join us at the starting phase, we gave out flyers at train stations and dropped them in mailboxes of housing estates. At night, we even used skate scooters to get around car parks to put flyers on every car, van and motorbike we could find. Our initial hard work paid off because to date, we've maintained a steady and stable supply of Qouriers.

**Yongjie:** Other major challenges we had to deal with included scepticism and disbelief. People asked us, *“If you don't hire your own delivery agents, how are your clients going to trust you?”* People close to us were also concerned for our future because I left my job in Shanghai and started this business with Elston full-time. They were worried for us because we were not young anymore and the opportunity cost for us to pursue this idea was high.

On top of juggling between the supply and demand of our services, we also had to educate our clients on why they should use crowdsourced couriers instead of contracted couriers. The hardest thing to do in marketing is to change people's perception because it costs a lot of money. Fortunately, we started around the same time as Uber and





because they invested heavily in marketing to promote their crowdsourced driving services, we were able to ride on this wave to create more awareness for our services.

“Entrepreneurs start out to **solve a problem**. If the problem still exists, we’ve done nothing to solve it. That’s why it’s essential for the both of us to **commit 100%** to our **idea and vision** and **stick to** them at **all costs** until the problem is solved.”

— Wong Yongjie

## Fund Raising

Another memorable experience was fund-raising. It takes about six months for each round but this task distracted us from building the business. The company is like our baby. We needed to raise funds for our baby in order to provide the necessities like milk powder and diapers for it to grow. In the midst of doing so, we were unable to spend time developing our baby and at times, it was a very painful and distracting process. As unpleasant as it may be, what needed to be done had to be done. We were proud to announce that to date, we’ve raised over a million dollars to continue building and growing our company.

I’ve worked in boutique agencies and large corporations. To be honest, nothing comes close to the kind of satisfaction as running my own business. Our decision has a lot to do with what we want out of life because a huge chunk of time will be spent on it. Do we want to work for someone or do our own thing? Not everyone is cut out for entrepreneurship. I know of people who are happy with their day jobs. The reason why Elston and I chose this path is that entrepreneurs start out to solve a problem. If the problem still exists, we’ve done nothing to solve it. That’s why it’s essential for the both of us to commit one hundred percent to our idea and vision and stick to them at all costs until the problem is solved.



## The Future of Logistics Technology

In order to be ahead of the curve, we have to live and breathe logistics all the time to know what works and what is coming up next. To be on top of our game, we need to anticipate what our clients require and expect, even before they approach us. That's why we're in the same-day delivery space while most of our competitors are into one to three-day deliveries. Although Singaporeans are pretty contented with one to three-day service now, eventually they'll prefer a same day delivery just like in China and USA. We foresee this rising trend and we're ready to catch the wave by having a large, ready pool of crowdsourced Qouriers. This will allow us to be more cost-effective. In turn, we can pass these cost-savings to our customers.

# Adaptability & Diversification

By Marc Ng

Berrylite is an American Premium 100% Fat-Free Frozen Yogurt, the froyo that has all of Hollywood abuzz with chatter that *“It’s the taste of happiness!”* Berrylite is spreading a whole lot of happiness, spicing up your life and tantalising your taste buds with new sensations!

Life as an entrepreneur is very exciting because every day is incredibly different. You can never plan ahead too much as the unexpected pops up on a daily basis. One needs to be quick-thinking. I have to troubleshoot either on the spot or have a ready solution in the back of my mind. It's vital for an entrepreneur to possess key qualities such as flexibility, perseverance and the spirit of preparedness to deal with the unexpected.

Running a business in Singapore, especially in the F&B industry, comes with numerous challenges. Regardless of the size of the company, manpower is a constant crunch. Whether you're a single-store or two-store company, potential employees don't know you and won't bother joining an unestablished company. Even when you've more than five stores, problems persist in another whole new dimension. With additional stores, there are increased overheads to take care of. In our industry, turnover rate is alarmingly high. In addition, employees may quit without giving ample notice or call in sick at the last minute, resulting in total mayhem. To avoid that, I have to activate the communication channels swiftly, rotating or deploying staff from one outlet to another outlet.



## Employee Retention Programme

It has become a norm for me to receive text messages such as, “Boss, I can't come down to work today”. In the worst-case scenario, I have to stand in for the staff to fulfil the timeslot since I can't find any replacement. As you can see, it's a fire-fighting situation every single day. In the long-term, such disruptions affect the morale of existing employees and new recruits. How can I ensure that such a problem doesn't persist in the company?

**“Learn to be less rigid and this entails forgoing some of the plans you've set out to do. In other times, learn to let the dust settle before jumping the gun.”**

The solution that we've come up with is a robust human resource retention programme that covers everything from training to building corporate culture and team spirit. It's a system that clearly spells out what needs to be done and how an employee will be rewarded when goals have been achieved. It's a contrast to conventional methods whereby promotions are typically awarded to employees based on seniority or the

relationship they have with their superiors. This has allowed us to attract, recruit and retain talent. With a growing number of millennials entering the workforce today, they are deeply interested in finding out our company's core values and what we stand for. They desire autonomy in making decisions, believing in staff empowerment. Remuneration aside, they're hungry to understand what they can get out from the entire working experience.

The source of inspiration came from a convention I attended at Zappos in America back in 2015. I was extremely impressed with its company culture and its ability to recruit and retain talent. Zappos adopted a system with no rules and each employee is empowered to do what they think is right for their patrons. It works like magic! Customers and employees are happier, and it is one of the main reasons why Amazon acquired Zappos for a whopping 1.2 billion dollars! This is the true value of an amazing corporate culture.

**“Variety signifies options and presents opportunities. To me, that’s the power of choice.”**

Besides Berrylite, I run three other businesses – Awesome Coffee, a café kiosk concept at Bugis Junction, a food service company that supplies all food-related products to hotels, cafes and restaurants as well as an online Korean retail store that sells accessories.

Such a retention programme is implemented across all my businesses, and it has helped me identify talent as well as provide them with more opportunities for growth and development. Typically, I like to expose the employees to different kinds of tasks and challenges. This is to test their ability to persevere and whether they'll make decisions in the interest of the customers, the company or themselves. I'll evaluate their performance once they've completed the tests. To be promoted to the position of manager, to be in charge of each business, the employee has to be with us for some time. A good time frame for evaluation is about three years because trust has to be built during this period and they've to prove that they are competent in making the right decisions for the company.

## Flexibility in Planning

Every day is a journey full of learning experiences for me. It's akin to walking in the dark. You're trying to figure out which way to go. My knowledge, acquired from what I've built up since day one, might have become dated and may not be as applicable in today's context. That's why in the business world, it is important to be flexible to stay in the game. As an entrepreneur running several businesses, being flexible often means having to adapt to changes and not be a block of wood, sticking only to plans. Although ten things have been planned, not all can be executed because of our fast-changing environment. You're considered lucky if you can accomplish eighty percent of what was planned!

Having said that, to be a successful entrepreneur, one has to learn to be less rigid and this entails forgoing some of the plans you've set out to do. In other times, learn to let the dust settle before jumping the gun. Conventional business planning of three to five





years doesn't work so well anymore. With technology advancements, it's not ideal to plan that long. The furthest one should plan is about two years. Ideally, it should be a one-year plan with a review of goals once every six months.

## The Power of Choice

Sometimes, people may tell you to just focus on one thing and make it good, but I beg to differ. Due to the current dynamic landscape, you'll miss out on other opportunities if you're focused on just one thing. Let me explain my point of view with a twenty-dollar analogy.

If you have your last twenty dollars in your pocket, will you choose to use all your money to have a good meal at a restaurant or go to a hawker centre and buy a variety of meals for the same price?

There's no right or wrong answer. It all boils down to personal choice. However, my personal take is to go for the latter because it gives you more options and opportunities. What if you went to the restaurant and bought a meal that didn't suit your taste? You'll have nothing else to eat. At the hawker centre, you could have bought three to five dishes and if one or two dishes were not to your liking, you would still have other options to choose from.

Variety signifies options and presents opportunities. To me, that's the power of choice. Why should you corner yourself to a position where you're only stuck with one option? Don't limit yourself to one thing because these options and potential opportunities give you choices which allow the multiplication of baskets and ultimately giving you better control in handling any situation. This has been the strategy I've adopted and it has worked well for me. It has allowed my team and I to create multiple streams of revenue to help us move forward.

## Diversification with Due Diligence

However, my greatest strength is also my weakness too. One of the biggest mistakes I've made in the course of business was to diversify into different industries too quickly. I was too enthusiastic to expand into industries that were not F&B related.

When times were good, anything we put out there sells. In contrast, when business slowed down, we ran into cash flow issues because we over-extended ourselves. That was when I had to preserve resources and solve each problem as it came. We had to go back to the drawing board and re-evaluate which businesses to keep and which to let go. I had to make difficult decisions for the sake of the company's survival, but we had to be objective in order to pull through that difficult time. The main lesson learnt was the importance of research and due diligence before diversifying. The returns from each business must justify the effort invested, otherwise, it'll just be a waste of time. I shouldn't be driven by the hype of jumping on the bandwagon too quickly to try something new.

Right now, we're in the midst of revamping the brand and menu for our flagship yogurt store. We started Berrylite about nine to ten years ago, so our regular customers have grown up. Our customer profile has changed, hence, we are exploring new ways to make our brand more appealing. It's all about adapting to the times.

The quote that keeps me going is, "*Live every day like there's no tomorrow*". Give it your best, give it your all. Always believe in yourself and know that anything is possible as long as you put your heart to it.



AM

*“A journey of a thousand miles begins  
with a single step.”*

*- Lao Tzu*

# BITIOUS

In this chapter, alumni entrepreneurs give you a **glimpse** into reasons behind their decision to take the big leap to **pursue their aspirations** and how they reached for the stars...

CHAPTER 2:



# A Deliberate Choice

By John Jervis Lee  
& Alvin Poh

Vodien Internet Solutions is a leading web-hosting service provider in Asia that supports over 35,000 companies and 210,000 users. Vodien provides reliable and high-performance hosting solutions.



John Jarvis Lee (Left), Alvin Poh (Right)

## How it All Began

**Jervis:** It was out of the blue. One fine day while we were waiting for the train on the platform, Alvin casually asked if we should put what we learnt in school to use, do something together and work towards becoming financially independent. It all started with this casual question.

We brainstormed for a few nights over the phone. To get the ball rolling, we finally decided to start with web design and development which we learnt in our first year in Temasek Polytechnic.

“We both chose to **give up sleep** rather than to sacrifice our grades or sports. There were many occasions when we attended class and had to **stand to keep ourselves awake.**”

— John Jarvis Lee

## Determined to Succeed

In the early days of the business, every day is a work day. The business needs you more than anything. During this time, your other half, be it girlfriend, wife or family has to be understanding and have great tolerance for your lack of time for them.

Back then, on top of our daily school lessons and assignments, we were both into dragon boating and were very committed to our co-curricular activity. Since time was always limited, something had to go. We both chose to give up sleep rather than to sacrifice our grades or sports. There were many occasions when we attended class and had to stand to keep ourselves awake.

Thankfully, as the company expanded, with additional manpower and systems in place, it became more structured. Now I only need to work on weekends occasionally and can devote more time to my family.

Looking back now, having a great partner is important and I was blessed to have one for the first business venture. The both of us went all out for Vodien; we took our entire life savings, reinvested all our profits and spent all our time in it with the singular goal of seeking growth for the business. I'm proud to say this investment has paid off many times over and I have no regrets.

## The 4S in Business

**Alvin:** We started our business in 2002. As customers of other hosting companies, we saw the pitfalls of the industry. Common pain points were slow performance, poor security, unresponsive support and terrible service availability. We decided that Vodien will address them by providing a level of service we would be happy with if we were customers ourselves. That's how our focus on the 4 S came about: *Speed, Security, Stability and Support*.

In the business, while both Jervis and I are very entrepreneurial, we greatly leverage on each other's individual strengths. Jervis is a lot more detail-oriented than I am while I'm more of a risk-taker. We complement each other's skills as we drive our business forward. We make it a point to work out any differences along the way, keeping in mind the growth and success of the business together is bigger and more important than any individual one of us. It was fortunate that we complemented each other very well in both personality and skills.

Part of the reason why we were able to work well from the beginning was that we worked together as teammates and classmates in Temasek Polytechnic before deciding to start on Vodien together. This led us to have a very strong working relationship.

## Merger & Acquisition

As part of our plans to consolidate the local market, Vodien had successfully completed six acquisitions in Singapore since 2012. In our roadmap, we had not planned for a merger and acquisition to happen in 2017. However, it was fortuitous that we met Dreamscape Networks because it was also a founder-led organisation that believed in the same things as we did. We had the same vision and it was also a systematic, process-oriented organisation like us. After getting to know the senior management team better, Jervis and I decided that it was a good idea to go ahead with the partnership and merge to achieve our common vision together – to be the number one online solutions provider in Asia.

## A Match Made in Heaven

To me, a large part of my success is attributed to having gone into business together with Jervis. Together, our partnership allowed us to go further than if we had done so individually. Besides that, a never-say-die attitude to keep trying even if

**“A never-say-die attitude to keep trying even if it means failing, and a willingness to take risks in order to grow the business were also key to Vodien’s growth.”**

– Alvin Poh



it means failing, and a willingness to take risks in order to grow the business were also key to Vodien's growth. Both of us were fully committed to succeed as we've given our all and didn't have any other alternatives to turn to. We sacrificed our social and family life in order to see the business grow.

If you're looking for a partner to start a business with, always make sure that you're going into business with a business partner and not a friend. While the two are not mutually exclusive, I've seen people go into business ventures on the basis of their friendship and failed because of the fact that sometimes, friends are unable to work together or have personality or skills that are too similar or conflicting.

Running a business is very demanding. It requires sacrifice and commitment in order to have a good balance between business and family life. A lot of time was taken away by business commitments and I'm thankful my family is very understanding and supportive of my business pursuits.





# The Next Best Thing to Do

By David Loke

ReadySpace focuses on providing cloud services to businesses through applications that provide performance, compliance and connectivity in Asia.



I was a full-time student then, like everybody else. During that period, nothing worth mentioning happened in my life. I was just like many Singaporean kids who went through primary school, secondary school and then to a local polytechnic. Honestly, I had hoped to get into Information Technology and Applied Science when I came to Temasek Polytechnic, but my results didn't qualify me for that course. I didn't stop there, as I even applied for a transfer, but was rejected. Thus, I had no choice but to remain in the current course.

**“Whenever I discovered something innovative, I kept exploring different ways in which I could blend it with the current products and services I was offering. To create an impact, I’ll figure out how to package it to sell to my existing clients to add value to their business.”**

Looking back, I think not getting into the course of my choice propelled me to do a lot of self-learning and reading on information technology at the school library as this was my interest. It came to a point when I didn't care much about the official diploma I was taking. Come to think of it now, it was really a reckless decision. I could have failed and dropped out of the course. Thankfully, I managed to get through with decent grades and graduated with a Diploma in Intelligent Building Technology.

During my polytechnic days, I took a few ad-hoc jobs working in restaurants and book stores; at Pacific Internet I worked as part-time technical support staff. Subsequently, I did freelance web development for businesses. Even though I knew nuts about business, I started my first company called “*The Oikoses*”. It meant a gathering of new people together in Hebrew. I wanted to consolidate businesses to build online businesses. I built websites for businesses and provided system integration services. My interest led me totally then. Whenever I discovered something innovative, I kept exploring different ways in which I could blend it with the current products and services I was offering. To create an impact, I’ll figure out how to package it to sell to my existing clients to add value to their businesses. I didn’t really need the extra cash, but when someone paid me for my products and services, it’s the sense of satisfaction that drives me to constantly deliver to my clients.

## At Crossroads

When I was in national service, I felt that the business was difficult to scale up in volume, so I decided to sell domain names and web spaces to customers, or what’s more commonly known today as web-hosting. After I had completed my national service, I was at a crossroad again. I had three options – pursue a degree, get a job and start climbing the corporate ladder or continue with my business.

During that time, there was the dot-com crash but I have always wanted to work in an IT or service provider firm. Due to the crash, I couldn’t find any decent paying job. Henceforth, it was between furthering my studies or continuing with my business. The best option was to continue with my business. I gave myself two years to make it work. It’s the interest in information technology that gave me the confidence to support my decision. At that time, I didn’t even know that what I was selling was trending, and orders just kept coming in.

## Finding a Niche

I started ReadySpace soon after and invited my army buddies to come on board to help cope with the growing workload. Everything changes quickly in our industry. What you think the market needs might not be what it seems. It’s important to listen to our customers to know what they really want – to keep finding a niche within a customer segment. There were many times when we lost to large international corporations who competed with us by offering the same product or service at a lower price.

On many occasions, I wanted to throw in the towel because I was exhausted. Now, it’s become a norm to me that if I want to continue being a businessman, I’ll just have to bite the bullet and keep innovating. I imagine myself as a warrior who will fight on even though all my limbs are gone. It’s the fighting spirit that kept me going. There’ll always be a specific market that will want our product, so we just need to persevere and keep digging for that sweet spot by using data analytics. Once we’ve found a sweet spot, we’re to build on it and quickly attempt to find another sweet spot. This cycle has to continue because if we break the cycle, someone will take over in a blink of an eye.



"All of us are **unique** individuals and I stand proud of that. Learn from others, but don't become someone else."

## Be Proud of Who You Are

As a bootstrapped company from the beginning, there were many things I've learnt as an entrepreneur. The greatest lesson is what you build shows who you really are. Your business will amplify what you stand for as a person and will be reflected through the company's culture, products and services. This realisation has forced me to make sure I lead a life that is right so that the rest will fall into place by itself. I started building this business with only \$3,000, but today, our company is making over

\$8 million in revenue with eight offices and twenty-five employees across the region.

All of us are unique individuals and I stand proud of that. Learn from others, but don't become someone else. Observe what successful people have done in the industry but use them only as a reference point. Infuse your own style and that's when you'll be able to create your own market that buys your products.

# The Power to CREATE

By Kingsley Peh & Elfaine Tan

NBT ASIA creates digital native brands or invests in online brands with proven business models and we scale these brands internationally. We focus predominantly on fast-moving categories with high value and consumer categories such as fashion and sports & fitness.



Elfaine Tan (Left), Kingsley Peh (Right)

**Elfaine:** To both Kingsley and I, entrepreneurship is a way of life. A lot of people like to ask why we wanted to set up our own business. They thought that it's because we wanted to make more money but it's more than that. The both of us are in tune with our lives. When we come across an idea, we can literally talk for hours. We want to expose ourselves to different things and we enjoy this process. It's the power to create and the power to turn ideas into realities that keep us going. We believe that in whatever we do, when we give it our all and find joy in what we're doing, the money will come. That's why I feel that it has become a way of life for the both of us.

Our entrepreneurship journey started from our Temasek Polytechnic days when we started a social media agency called EK Media which ran branding and social media campaigns for advertisers. The Sample Store was EK Media's flagship online platform with the sole focus of distributing product samples to end-consumers.

I was in charge of business development back then so it was just like any other day when I went out to pitch to brands to use our sampling platform. Little did I know that a potential client I was presenting to was actually one of the key management personnel from Singapore Post! I presented and proposed as per normal but after a while, she revealed her identity and shared the purpose of the meeting was to understand in detail about our business and what we're doing. From there, we began to explore how we could collaborate with Singapore Post. After some discussions, she realised that the best way was for Singapore Post to acquire us so as to further leverage on what we've built up as a company so far.

**“We didn't want our entrepreneurial drive to fizzle out because we knew we have so much more to give. After much deliberation, both of us decided to leave our corporate jobs to start something of our own again.”**

**— Elfaine Tan**



## The Acquisition Process

The whole merger and acquisition process took about fifteen months and it was an eye-opening experience for the both of us. We had three lawyers sitting in our office for a few weeks, going through our documents one by one and we also had to undergo a thorough auditing procedure with our accountant. As young entrepreneurs just starting out, we didn't feel overwhelmed but instead, we were very excited and we took everything that came as a learning experience – kind of like a crash course in business.

After the company was acquired for \$1.2 million, we were very fortunate to be offered management roles in Singapore Post to continue growing the business and team, so Kingsley and I stayed with them for about one and a half years.

Everything was good while we were working at Singapore Post. We had good superiors, a wonderful team to work with and a decent salary. But we felt that we were too young to continue staying in our comfort zone. We didn't want our entrepreneurial drive to fizzle out because we knew we have so much more to give. After much deliberation, both of us decided to leave our corporate jobs to start something of our own again.

I started my first e-commerce brand back in 2015. Kingsley only joined me at the start of 2017 and that's when we officially launched NBT Asia. In this latest venture, we see ourselves as e-commerce brand creators. We want to help take digital native brands from ideation to fruition in the shortest period of time.

With over ten years of doing social media and working with advertisers under our belt, we want to put

our experience and expertise to good use by creating and building brands. Our main goal is to have a list of e-commerce brands we can call our own because that's what we love doing the most.

**“Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that one day, we would be acquired by Singapore Post. We were just two young, budding entrepreneurs creating something we can call our own and doing what we love.”**

– Kingsley Peh

## Starting a Business with Low Capital

**Kingsley:** Elfaine and I started our business in a naïve manner. As I was an info-communications student in Temasek Polytechnic back then, I acquired the hard skills of information technology and it was an enabler. Most of the time, the both of us will be throwing ideas around but it'll usually be along the lines of a conventional business setup, like how we can purchase something and sell it at a higher price to make a profit. Business models, revenue

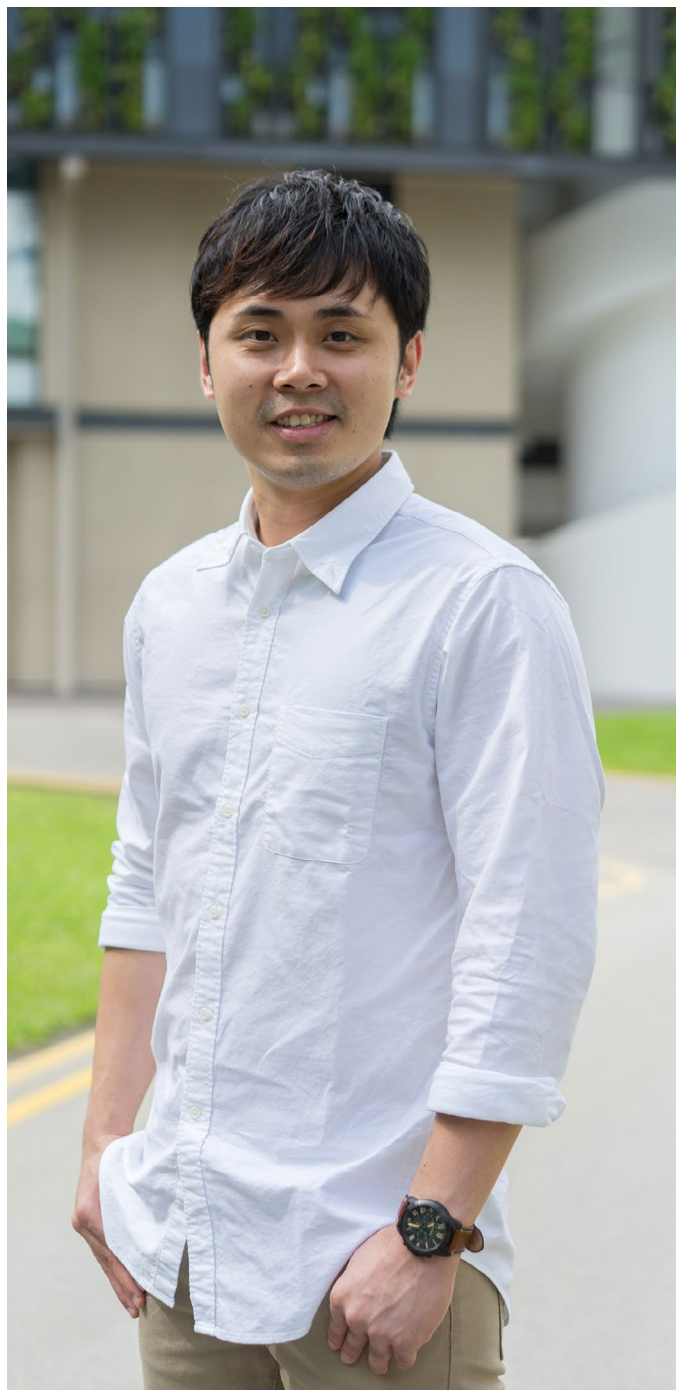


models or even business planning and forecasting have never crossed our minds. I could easily create a website but what can we sell? If we were to buy some products, the initial investment would be a challenge for us so we had to think of a creative solution on how to start a business without much capital.

The eureka moment came when we thought of samples since they are free. *“Why not set up an online store distributing samples? This way, we’ll have something up and running which doesn’t require much capital to start.”*

Filled with excitement, we immediately printed our name cards and prepared a presentation deck, all in the home office we were working from. That’s how we actually started and the rest was history. Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that one day, we would be acquired by Singapore Post. We were just two young, budding entrepreneurs creating something we can call our own and doing what we love.

In the beginning, my weakness was that I was too idealistic, toying with too many ideas that I didn’t focus on executing them. My mentor taught me that ideas are cheap and can be worth just a dollar but ideas well executed can be worth \$13 billion and the example he gave was Whatsapp. My early weakness was how I discovered my current strength. Right now, I’m more practical. Every idea goes through a strategic filter and I’ll study each option to evaluate if the execution of an idea will be worth our time and effort.



## Conflict Resolution

As spouses working as business partners, it would be a lie to say that we don't quarrel. In fact, we quarrel quite often because of work and I'm sure Elfaine will second that. The both of us are very strong-willed but over the years, we've developed a system to help us put our personal and professional lives in place.

We'll usually go through this two-step process whenever there's a disagreement. The first step is to avoid. If possible, we'll try our best to avoid any disagreements or potential conflict that may arise from work. We'll be as objective and professional about it as possible and remind ourselves not to take things too personally. If the first step fails, we'll reluctantly go into the next step to raise an argument. We'll trash it out to state our differences but we'll keep it brief and have a cool down period when both of us will not talk about this topic anymore, and then we move on. The key to making this work is to recover fast and take things forward. If we brood over each argument, it'll eventually wear the both of us down. At the end of the day, we know whatever decision made is in the best interest of the company or the brand. There's no point bringing those heated arguments over to our personal lives. That's how we bounce back every time and we're very conscious of keeping work at work and not let it affect our personal relationship with each other.

My advice to aspiring entrepreneurs is that if you have the idea, just execute it. Don't let fear hold you back. Regardless of whether you are young or old, if you're passionate about your aspirations, you'll need to find a way to make it work. If you can't even find a way to overcome your initial challenge of starting out, then entrepreneurship will be a very tough journey for you because you're going to face numerous obstacles as an entrepreneur. In our line of work, we always say, *"everyday, we're fire-fighting, every year, we're problem solving."*



# Grab the opportunities Given

By Aaron Rylan Keder

Newash Facility Management has built a reputation as a premium quality boutique cleaning company in Singapore offering efficient and flexible cleaning solutions.



By day, I was a part-time cleaner and by night, a popcorn-seller in a cinema. This went on for about a month while my mother was serving notice to her client because she had difficulty finding manpower for her cleaning services. I was only twenty at that time and I'd just completed the last exam of my final year in school. I had some spare time in the day so I took her place to be her relief cleaner. This was when I realised that money can be made in the cleaning business.


**“Take the stairs, climb each level slowly instead of taking the lift; in other words, don't rush, always take baby steps. Follow the process and enjoy the journey along the way.”**

## **A Path Crafted to Learn**

I saw an opportunity to learn something new in everything I did. Even while I was working at the cinema, I learnt sales tactics like how to up-sell. As a cleaner, I picked up hands-on skills that have proven to be valuable, especially in my industry where technical knowledge and the “know-hows” are extremely important.

When I first entered Temasek Polytechnic at seventeen, I never thought of becoming a boss. That's why I took a general diploma in Business Process and Systems Engineering because I really didn't know which industry I wanted to enter. Never did I imagine that one day, I'd be an employer. It was by chance that I had the opportunity to enter the cleaning industry, but I made full use of it.

As a fresh diploma graduate waiting to start national service, making some money was good enough. Once I spotted this opportunity in the cleaning industry, I started a small scale business supplying part-time cleaners. I was able to make a few hundred dollars a month so I carried on in this trade. While I was serving the army, I hired someone to run the operations for me.



**“Be patient and solve it step by step. Know that there’ll always be solutions to all problems.”**

## **Never Despise Small Beginnings**

My father is a very practical person. He supported me throughout my entrepreneurial journey by sharing with me words of wisdom. He would say, *“Take the stairs, climb each level slowly instead of taking the lift”*; in other words, don’t rush, always take baby steps. Follow the process and enjoy the journey along the way.

I heeded his advice, so if there’s something I can’t do, I won’t do it first. For example, if I don’t have the resources to do something for a client, I’ll just politely say I can’t do it but I’ll refer them to someone who can. There’s no point to make empty promises or *“chiong”* into something you don’t have the ability to deliver in the

name of monetary gains. Respect is gained and reputation is built over the years through consistent effort. Hence, if you over-promise and under-deliver, you’ll eventually lose the trust of your clients. Exercise honesty, integrity and humility in all business dealings. These are some of the important values I uphold in my life which have served me well.

Another useful tip that has helped me along the way is to always listen more and talk less. Although I’m the final decision maker, I’ll usually take a step back and seek advice and opinions from family and friends because two heads are better than one. By hearing their point of view, I was able to gain new insights to certain things they saw that I might have missed out.

## There Will Always be Solutions to Problems

In business, every day is a new day and you're bound to face all sorts of different problems. Be patient and solve it step by step. Know that there'll always be solutions to all problems.

The most vivid memory I had of a challenging problem was a project where I was managing the entire cleaning services for a condominium. One of my staff accidentally poured acid instead of the chemical wash while scrubbing the floor which resulted in severe stains and even burnt marks. The management was extremely upset and demanded compensation.

Unfortunately, this happened to all the floors of the entire building and the cost of hacking and replacement with a new set of tiles amounted to a six-figure sum. This was one of the biggest problems I've encountered in the course of doing business and it took me several days to troubleshoot this issue. Finally, I found the best solution was to use a special chemical that will remove the top layer of tiles and get it repainted. This solution was cheaper to implement and it solved the problem. This is just one of the many examples of my experiences in problem solving.

## The "ARK" Brand

From 2008 till today, my business has constantly been evolving. With the exception of ARK-Style, our business revolves around everything that has to do with a building, from construction of houses all the way to interior design and cleaning services.

The name "ARK" is formed from my initials and it's a nice way to incorporate it into what I do as a brand.

## Sense of Accomplishment

Since young, I had a natural flair for leadership. In class, I was appointed as the monitor and in sports, I was selected to be the soccer captain. In secondary three, I was chosen to be the head prefect.

I wasn't someone who excelled in academics and I enjoyed playing sports more. This is the reason why I like working in a team. I gain a sense of satisfaction when I'm able to lead a team to victory or accomplish certain goals in my capacity as a leader.

This trait has stayed with me till adulthood, and now, I want to give back to the community by empowering the next generation of youths. Students today are book-smart but not many of them are street-smart. Some of them don't know what they want to do after graduating and they lack direction. I want to inculcate the right mentality and mindset in the younger generation to let them know that being book-smart alone will not guarantee their success in the future. They need to know how to go about leading their own life, and that making money should not be their only focus.

The youths are our leaders of tomorrow and they'll be the ones who will bring Singapore to the next level.

# Win **BIG** in Events **Planning**

By Tiffany Chia & Serene Tan

We consider ourselves an exciting event management company defined by our highly personal and creative approach to event management. “DARE TO BE DIFFERENT” is what we live by.

**Tiffany:** What sparked our interest to enter the business of event management was our module on project management in Temasek Polytechnic. Serene and I were classmates and we became best friends because of this shared interest. We literally did every project together. For this module, we were tasked to plan a wedding and we had a lot of fun doing it. With our newfound interest, we decided to intern at an events company to learn more about this trade and we intentionally chose a smaller company so we could get a more hands-on experience of the various functions from planning to executing an event.

OHMYEVENT was originally an idea for our final year project which we attained a commendation award. Serene and I were shortlisted to showcase our project in Temasek Polytechnic's 2013 Engineering Project Show. This was when our mentor from Entrepreneurship Centre, Mr. Ng Shin Leong, spotted us and invited us to apply for a grant by SPRING Singapore to turn it into a real business.

**“Selling an idea to another business entity is a completely different skill set altogether. We had no one to teach us how to do a proper sales deck so we had to learn everything from scratch on our own.”**

— Tiffany Chia



Serene Tan (Left), Tiffany Chia (Right)





## Facing Rejections

To get our idea off the ground, we needed a pool of vendors and consumers fast. We ended up getting the vendors first by going out there, knocking on people's doors and asked if they were interested to hear our pitch. We also picked up the phone, called and emailed whoever we could to see if they were keen to join our new marketplace platform. Serene and I were only twenty-one back then when we first started out in 2013. Due to our age and how we looked, potential clients doubted us. Some asked, *“Is this your school project?”*, and *“Are you an intern working for this company?”*. We've also encountered nasty remarks from hostile people saying, *“I give you five minutes, pitch now and leave”*.

Although we had some prior experience in retail sales, selling an idea to another business entity is a completely different skill set altogether. We had no one to teach us how to do a proper sales deck so we had to learn everything from scratch on our own. In managing sales or events, people only chose someone who was more experienced.

Aside from the uphill task to get our idea across to our potential clients, traditional event suppliers were also unwilling to go online as they preferred to continue with their way of doing business. This hindered us from

scaling our online event marketplace platform. So after much consideration, we decided to turn our business back to a traditional event company which we had experience in before embarking on this idea.

We positioned ourselves as a one-stop events management service, from planning all the way to the execution stage. We believe service is important, so for entertainment-related events, we'll take it a step further to understand our clients' goals and objectives for organising such a gathering and we'll help our clients achieve them through the events.

## Back to Planning Events

**Serene:** Although we went back to become an events planning company, it was still tough because in our industry, experience is very important. Most clients viewed us as inexperienced and didn't trust us to co-ordinate their events. We submitted countless proposals for the first year, taking baby steps by coordinating smaller-scaled events first, so that we can learn on the go. We understood where their concerns came from because once an event goes wrong, there isn't a second chance to rectify it.

We're thankful for our mentor because he was the one who referred our services to his network. Getting referrals is still the most effective way for us to get new business. We're also grateful for the first few clients who gave us chances in our early days as well. With the portfolio we've amassed over the years, running one successful event after the other, we've built up the credibility and track record for ourselves to prove what we're truly capable of. Today, we're a team of eight to ten with full-time staff and interns. We also have return clients who worked with us for the fourth consecutive year and new clients streaming in from referrals or word of mouth.

**"The reason why I wanted to start my own business is to **make a difference in society, giving back in my own ways.**"**

— Serene Tan



## Wild Productions

In 2015, we started a new events planning arm called Wild Productions. Unlike OHMYEVENT where we do more corporate events such as dinner and dance and gala dinners, Wild Production focuses on fun, vibrant and youthful events like parties and concerts. Tiffany and I did have our fair share of arguments before launching

this brand. When we first started, we were more easy-going because we were new and could try anything. Now that we've been in the industry for a while, we're more knowledgeable and have a clear direction of where we wanted this brand to go in the future. The both of us had a lot of differing ideas, from the vision to the tagline of the company and even which charities to choose. At the end of the day, we had to learn how to put our differences aside to make a decision for the best interest of the company. Being in a business partnership is like a couple getting married, you'll have to compromise. Communication is crucial to truly understand the point of view of the other person.

The reason why I wanted to start my own business is to make a difference in society, giving back in my own ways. If I'm in the corporate world holding a full-time job, most of my time will be locked in the office doing work. As

an entrepreneur, I'm being exposed to different people and it opens doors for me to help more segments of society. I have better control over my time and the flexibility to do what I like that can make an impact.

Tiffany and I are working really hard to create a company that can run without us. It's true that we have to put in more effort now and we're actually working much longer hours as compared to our peers but in the long-term, we believe our hard work will pay off and we can reap the fruits of our labour.





*“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”*

In this chapter, each alumni entrepreneur’s story demonstrates that true strength comes from facing adversities. Be it personal or business setbacks, they will share with you how they **faced each challenge** head on and **rose above problems** in their own unique way.

# RESILIENT

# Fighting Your Way to the Top

By Eddie Lee

The name New Union represents unity between Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Financiers and Technology. With offices in Singapore, China, Taiwan, Cambodia and Philippines, we are a New Union of lending platforms across Asia Pacific.



## A Love for Martial Arts

Martial art was a big part of my life and it still is up till today. It's a pivot in my life. Martial arts gave me a lot of confidence. I was this skinny, young boy back in the days. Therefore, being able to compete and fight to represent the school or my country in competitions boosted my self-confidence and taught me how to carry myself well. In Wushu and Sanshou, they taught us the spirit of perseverance. I knew that it was perfectly alright to fail as this was what happened in sports too. There is no such thing as a one-hit wonder. It's through small failures that we get our eventual success. If we persevere long enough, good things will start to happen. I brought this mentality to work so I continually pressed on in business even when it was tough.

Back in my secondary school to polytechnic days, my father took over my grandfather's hawker business when he passed on and had to hire another chef to take his place. As my father was the sous chef while my grandfather was the main chef, regular customers who have been eating at our place for years could tell the difference and slowly drifted away. Business dropped but the overheads stayed. My father didn't want to cut losses so the business was in the red month after month. Desperate, he borrowed money from the loan sharks. However, he couldn't repay them and our family was harassed. My parents were eventually separated and soon after, he passed away. My mother raised both my younger brother and I all on her own.

**“There is no such thing as a one-hit wonder. It's through small failures that we get our eventual success.”**

She was a production worker and the sole breadwinner of the family, bringing home only six hundred dollars a month. Unlike most stories out there, starting my own business wasn't to pursue my passion or to build on a brilliant idea, it was a necessary feat. When I first started, it wasn't even a registered business. I just took ad-hoc tasks while still studying in school.

## Working from Home

I started from home in the living room of my house. Every morning, I would “report to work” on time. Marketing was very inconvenient without Facebook. Back then, the only social media platform was Friendster which wasn’t useful for marketing except for uploading photos. To let the people around me know what I was doing, I sent out an email to all my friends in my contacts telling them I have started my one man agency. No one replied my email. I was disappointed. My mother was also concerned because she saw me in the living room all day in front of the computer. She asked me, “*Eddie, why don’t you go out and work?*” I replied her hastily, “*But mummy, I am working!*” I needed more sales and realised that I had to up my marketing game so I decided to send more emails.

**When I was running a bootstrapped business, every month felt like I was beating the red light, barely making it through to continue fighting for another month.”**

By sheer luck, one of my classmates wrote back this time, saying her friend’s company was closing down and needed me to take over. They wanted out so everything was given to me. From the list of customers, I inherited nine and served them well. All nine of them went on a recurring payment plan and that gave me a good start. My first few customers referred me more customers and I never had a chance to take a break since then. Ten months later, I bought my first car with the money I earned and my mother didn’t ask me to go out and get a job anymore!

## Hard Work Paid Off

After freelancing for six years, I saw a growing demand from companies who wanted to build their own websites. With the little experience gained as a freelancer, I decided to officially register a company for my web-development agency in 2004.

Because I didn’t have much capital, I roped in a good friend of mine, Alvin Huang, to co-rent an office space together. I hired my first web designer while I focused on getting the projects. When we grew,

I started to see a programming requirement for the jobs we took in so I hired a programmer. Unconsciously, I built a team; so I just duplicated what I did and hired a project manager to help me oversee all the projects I brought in. From the first day I started my business, I’ve never raised capital from any investors. We depended purely on organic growth. When we were a team of five, we were neither here nor there. The company had just enough to scrape through each month and I had to always chase for payments. Months dashed by in the blink of an eye and cash flow management was crucial. When I was running a bootstrapped business, every month felt like I was beating the red light, barely making it through to continue fighting for another month.

Everything got better in our eighth year in business when we started to scale up. We grew to a team of eighteen and surplus profits were ploughed back into the company. We kept it as reserved ammunition to help in business expansion. Our big break came when a buyer was interested in what we were doing and decided to acquire us. Eventually, I successfully exited the business for a seven-figure amount.





## Client Turned Business Partner

I believe in affinity and that everything happened for a reason. For all that I've gained, I had no regrets running the business the way I did. Ten years of struggle to run this business, to me, was just to lead me to my current business partner. He was one of my clients back then and when I first met him, he had a fantastic business idea with plenty of potential.

He had come from a traditional lending background and saw what happened in the west and how peer-to-peer lending grew in popularity within China. We could do the same with localisation for Singapore and Southeast Asia. He had the finance background while I understood how to assemble the business with technology. We thought the pairing was a great match and came together to start New Union.


## Financial Technology

We're not only a technology company. A wealth of experience is behind the lending mechanism. It will not be a viable business model just to create a platform and matchmake everyone. To build a robust platform, besides the technology, one has to be a lender and understand the psychology of business owners in need of borrowing money too. Having being a business owner for the past nineteen years has also helped me to relate to SMEs and assess their situations from their points of view. New Union represents the unity between SMEs, financiers and technology.

# Bouncing Back From Failure

By Edwin Yeo

Opcon is an engineering manufacturer and a technology developer specialising in the automation, robotics and marine sectors.



If there was one thing I hated the most when I first started out, it was doing sales. I didn't like to do anything that required me to talk to others. I knew this about myself early on and I didn't want it to hinder my progress as an entrepreneur. With much grit, I decided to push myself out of my comfort zone and participated in a local reality television show called Angel's Gate to pitch my business idea.



## The Road to Starting a Business

The road that led me to start my own business didn't happen overnight. It was a series of events and the support from important people in my life that directed me to this path. When I was in national service, I wanted to be an air force pilot. Much hard work was put into it and I passed all the tests and requirements. However, they had a point ranking system so once they had enough trainees, admission to the academy closed. Unfortunately, I didn't make the cut. They broke the news to me in the final interview and I was devastated.

After the interview, I sat outside the office for four whole hours. I didn't know what to do next. I saw this as a failure and I questioned myself, “*Where did I fail at?*”

Over the next one to two years, my mind was in a blank. I really couldn't think of what else I wanted to do. Although I was given a chance to sign on as an officer and was offered an opportunity to go for ranger course training, I turned it down because I was so focused on my goal of becoming a pilot. It was during this time that I met

**“I’m thankful for my foresight to keep moving forward and learn from my past. If I was upset and bitter about not becoming an air force pilot, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”**

Xavier Liaw, a clerk who was placed under my supervision. The both of us had something in common and that was diving. He was a technical diver so when he asked me if I wanted to go diving, I readily agreed. We started doing leisure diving over the weekends and that was when I slowly found my interest in diving back again.

## An Interest in Diving

After I have completed my national service, I went out to look for a job. As I was an engineering graduate, it was only natural for me to find a job as an engineer. I got restless really quickly because I was someone who enjoyed doing challenging tasks but my job scope was routine and mundane. My mother could tell that I was unhappy so she told me one day, *“You have many talents and interests. Why not consolidate all of them and start a business of your own?”* It was this soft nudge from my mother that gave me the idea that I could very well start something of my own.

I job-hopped three times and in my fourth company, I took up the position of a research project manager. I was very fortunate because my boss was very supportive of the research work I did. He saw my potential in this field so he created another research centre at Nanyang Technological University and entrusted me to do quite a few robotics projects there and some with Temasek Polytechnic as well. He was also aware of my interest in diving. Surprisingly, he allowed me to run my company,

which teaches diving courses over the weekend, while I was still working for him. Sometimes, he’ll even casually joke with me saying that someday, I’ll leave him to work on my business full-time.

**“I always told myself that no matter what the problem is, I’ll have to overcome it.”**

Subsequently, I had some projects in my day job and they were all underwater related. As my boss knew I had an interest in this area, he put me in charge of doing all the underwater related projects and that was where I started to look into underwater robotics. With my knowledge in hydraulics and automation, I could easily apply all these concepts underwater for this venture to work. Someone introduced us to an underwater vehicle and that was when I came up with my own diving product.

## Learning Business Skills

The moment for me to strike out on my own came when the episode of me pitching on Angel's Gate aired on national television. My boss called me up and was impressed with the product I invented. He wanted to be my business partner. He was a very good businessman while I enjoyed making my own inventions, so our partnership was perfect.

My boss taught me how to build a business. Every evening, he drilled me on how to strategise and write business proposals. He showed me how to capture and present all the key pointers in any business pitch. I was invited to all of his business meetings and he forced me to talk to clients. As a mentor, he educated me on the importance of networking and human interaction. He would say, *"It's not what you know but who you know that counts."* Besides my boss, the other person who supported me was my wife. She helped me to brush up on my sales pitches and networking skills. She was also the brainchild for coming up with the company name, Opcon. In 2014, my boss' prediction came true. I won a huge overseas contract and there was no way I could stay in his company any longer. I had to leave to focus on building Opcon full-time.

I'm thankful for my foresight to keep moving forward and learn from my past. If I was upset and bitter about not becoming an air force pilot, I wouldn't be where I am today. There's no point in looking back and staying in the past. As an engineer, we're trained to solve problems on a daily basis. I always told myself that no matter what the problem is, I'll have to overcome it.



# The School of Hard Knocks

By Dainial Lim

Cayman Group is the holding company of Singapore Corporate Advisory Pte Ltd & Singapore Immigration Pte Ltd. The firm started back in 2005 as one of Singapore's first immigration firms. We specialise in Singapore immigration matters such as Singapore Permanent Residence applications, work pass applications, and other visa or corporate-related matters.



## Boss Turned Business Partner

I started my first business when I was working at a law firm right after national service. This law firm was actually the same company I was interning at when I was studying in Temasek Polytechnic. While studying and working, I chanced upon a book called *“Rich Dad, Poor Dad”* by Robert Kiyosaki. The author taught that in order to gain financial freedom, one must shift to the *“Business Owner and Investor”* quadrant instead of remaining in the *“Employee and Self-employed”* quadrant. This made sense to me when I saw my boss working hard till ten in the office on a Saturday night. I told myself, *“That’s not what I wanted to do when I reached forty.”* Becoming a specialist in my field was not what I wanted and I didn’t want to be a slave to money. I wanted the ability to take control of

my own time so the next day, I submitted my resignation letter. To my surprise, my boss counter proposed by offering me a partnership to join him in the company. I used what savings I had over the past year and invested right away to get a fifty percent share. That was how my entrepreneurship journey began.

I didn’t choose to be in this industry. I always wanted to run my own café. It all happened during a corporate consultancy session when I was tasked to do up an immigration case. I saw that more could be done with the immigration industry so I didn’t just take this like another task but did it to the best of my ability. My philosophy when I first started out was that anything

“When I first started as a **young boss**, I was very **lonely**. I had no colleagues as peers to talk to as I was the boss and my friends were either still studying or were employees. I couldn’t find anyone who could relate to what I was going through...”



I wanted done well, I've to do it myself. So there I was, handling immigration cases one after another on my own. We were the first company to provide immigration services in Singapore.

## A Personal Touch

When I first started as a young boss, I was very lonely. I had no colleagues as peers to talk to as I was the boss and my friends were either still studying or were employees. I couldn't find anyone who could relate to what I was going through and because I was still young, occasionally I would even doubt my own work capabilities. In our industry, people assumed that consultants had to be of a certain age because it reflected their experience. Age bias was a stigma I had to overcome but never once did I let the opinions of others deter me from what I needed to accomplish. Instead, I found it beneficial at times to prove them otherwise. I had to adapt and work around their perceptions.

I challenged the notion of having no *“traditional corporate experience”* by giving my own version of *“personalised corporate style”* with a sincere personal touch. Over fifty percent of our clients were referred to us by other satisfied clients so this proved that my approach worked.

**“It's not about how well I managed people but how well I developed and nurtured other leaders.”**



## A Double-edged Sword

The greatest moment in my business career was when I hit my first million-dollar mark. That day, I almost cried and went back home as soon as I could and gave my mother a huge hug. Ironically, my worst moment came a few months after that. At twenty-four years old, I bought myself a sports car and started another three to four new businesses. I went out of focus and thought I was invincible. I also made many foolish investments: a restaurant, a club, stocks and a ridiculous patent. All in all, I spent close to two hundred thousand and none of them gave me any returns.

I also became very harsh and ruthless to my staff, falling into an “*executive syndrome*”. I acted as I wished and didn’t think carefully about stretching my dollar. Clearly, I forgot what it was like to bootstrap when I just started. This caused me to lose a lot of money and accumulated a six-figure debt. I was hit hard when the economy went down and I had to rebuild everything from scratch again. In the process, I did some self-reflection and relooked into the business to see how I could bring it back to its former glory.

To get out of debt as quickly as I could, I had to cut costs and I made a difficult decision to downsize the company, reducing our headcount from eighteen to eight. I also had to forge more cross-industry partnerships so I could create more value-added services for my new and existing clients.

If I could turn back the clock to do something differently, I would have gone to India and stayed in a monastery until I learnt the art of patience and being grounded. That would have stopped me from making so many impulsive decisions. From this experience, one of the most important lessons I’ve learnt is about leadership.

It’s not about how well I managed people but how well I developed and nurtured other leaders. When I was younger, I behaved as a mean boss and demanded work be done. Now, I make a conscious effort to be like a big brother and mentor. This led to higher productivity in the company, high retention rates and much happier employees. On a personal level, I’ve also learnt to be more prudent in my spending and not to invest in anything I wasn’t familiar with.

## Definition of a Successful Entrepreneur

In my humble opinion, I think successful entrepreneurs are persons who can take care of themselves, their families, and the people around them. With their position and influence, they’re able to make a positive contribution back to the community. Apart from doing business, I wish to eventually start a family and travel around the world with the one I love. I also want to be more involved with activities that can leave a lasting impact on society. It’s my goal to be known and remembered for the things I’ve done to make life better for others.

# Hard Work Trumps it All

By David Cheang

Fulife is in the business of producing top-grade herbal supplements. With the use of highly advanced technological manufacturing processes and the investment in Traditional Chinese Medicine-based research and development, we have created a revolutionary new Cordyceps supplement.



## A Rough Childhood

I had a difficult childhood. My parents were always busy working, so I had to live with my grandparents since young. I was very mischievous and was more focused on playing and having fun than anything else. I could only imagine how difficult it was to take care of me. As a child, I suffered from a speech impediment which made a huge impact on my confidence. Till the age of ten, I wasn't able to properly articulate my words, causing problems in communication with my friends and teachers. With my decreasing motivation and the need for attention and support, I started to lose focus in my studies. At age eleven, I was the last student in class.

That was a wake-up call for me. I realised that I had to work a lot harder in order to make something of myself. After a few years of dedication and constant practice, I got over my speech impediment and rapidly improved in my studies. My breakthrough as a kid came when I was in secondary four. I was selected to be a school prefect and this newfound sense of responsibility opened my eyes to the importance of studying hard and finding success early on in life. My renewed earnestness in my studies paid off and I emerged top in my school that year.

## Humble Beginnings

Our family came from humble beginnings. My father was a hardware store assistant and my mother was an accounts clerk. I saw how hard they worked to save every penny they could just to start an electronics shop selling home appliances. This shop was actually right opposite Temasek Polytechnic. Hence, when I was still studying, I

would go over to help out whenever I could. I admired my parents for the sacrifice they had made to start this business and I aspired to start a business of my own one day. I saw the positive aspects of running a business such as having more control over what I wanted to do and how it enriched the lives of others.

When business was good, my parents had many employees. Each job position meant that the company was not only supporting the worker but his or her entire family. To me, this was the most meaningful part of running a business.

My life was relatively normal until the age of twenty-one. Due to the Asian financial crisis, my parent's business went bust. My father suffered from not just one, but four strokes over this period and because of his health, I had to become a guarantor for my parent's bank loans which amounted to millions of dollars. Banks sent

letters of demand. Suppliers and creditors banged on our doors. With the insurmountable debts, my parents had no choice and were forced to declare bankrupt. As the sole guarantor, I became bankrupt too. The next few years were tough on everyone. My parents argued nearly every day and I found myself slowly falling into depression from the emotional turmoil. Faced with the desperation of needing money, even for basic necessities, I decided to turn to property as I needed something that could pay out a sizeable commission in a short time.

I stumbled upon my first client when I was leafing through the classified advertisements. I saw that a woman was trying to sell her walk-up apartment and boldly contacted her. In spite of the apartment's lack of maintenance, I was determined to sell it to prove my colleagues wrong. Ultimately, I succeeded in selling it in three months and that led to my foray into the property industry as a real estate salesman.

I put in twenty-hour days. To save money on tolls and parking fees, I'd sometimes just use a bicycle to get around in between appointments. On days when I didn't have enough money, I ate bread just to get by. Those were horrible times but with sheer hard work and grit, I just kept going. Pressing on, I eventually made it to the top of my career with more than eight hundred real estate agents under me. In 2013, I moved on to become a property developer as it has always been something I've dreamed of doing.

**"My definition of faith was when I believed in something strong enough — to the point it ran in my bloodstream and through my veins. It was something I held on to dearly."**



## Definition of Faith

The greatest motivation that kept me going all this while was faith. My definition of faith was when I believed in something strong enough – to the point it ran in my bloodstream and through my veins. It was something I held on to dearly. Faith was the compelling reason that moved me to do something about my current circumstance. I had faith in my parents and family members. This episode happened right after my polytechnic days and the main reason was to get my family out of this complex situation to lead a better life. Faith was the driving force that kept me going during the hard times. Without it, I would have been discouraged and gave up a long time ago.

**“What has led me to one success after another was pure hard work and focus.”**

## The Full Spectrum of Life

Today, I'm still running my real estate agency, property development and construction company. All of them are still ongoing except that now, the primary focus of my time is spent on my new setup called Fulife. The main reason is that, with good health supplements, people not just in Singapore but around the world can enjoy the full spectrum of life. It's important to have good health during the pursuit of wealth. Most of us spend our entire life making money that we forget to take care of our health. My father was a good example. He suffered so much because of his illness. Once he was bed-ridden, there was nothing any of us could do.

As a local company with our products manufactured here, we're confident in the Singapore branding across the Southeast Asian region, especially for health supplement products. Consumers will have peace of mind because our country is known for its stringent rules and regulations for consumables. For a company to stay long-term and survive well, there must be a certain standard in quality and assurance. I'm excited to be diversifying into the wellness industry as the health and wellness field is something I strongly believe in.

## Hard Work and Focus

What has led me to one success after another was pure hard work and focus. I'll usually share the sugar cane analogy to encourage, motivate and inspire people who are currently struggling with life. *“The more sugar cane you put into the machine, the more juice you will get. The more hard work you put in, the better the results.”* Another school of thought might teach otherwise, such as not to follow conventional wisdom and to work smart instead. However, I firmly believe there are basic steps one must take in order to build a strong foundation. With a singular goal in mind, working hard at it brings focus and prevents distraction. Working hard at a goal is like putting the sugar cane through the machine over and over again. With the cup of sugar cane drink filled to the brim, that's when one can enjoy a refreshing drink and reap the rewards of a goal achieved.

# Feet <sup>on</sup> the Ground & eyes <sup>on</sup> the Stars

By Ruben Chong

Calvary Carpentry is a specialist that deals with the supply and installation of various wood products. We offer our clients the highest standards of design, materials and craftsmanship.



Do you remember that one of the popular pastimes during primary school was playing with country flag erasers? Two or more players challenge each other by landing over the opponent's eraser or hitting it off the table. Sometimes, we even put stapler bullets or a thumbtack on the flip side of the eraser to turn it into a spinning top and have a showdown to see whose country flag eraser could spin the longest. Well, while all my classmates bought the erasers from the school bookstore, I bought them directly from a wholesale supplier. I would sell them to my friends at a price lower than the bookshop's! So even as a young boy, I already knew how to buy low, sell high, and I even understood the concept of economies of scale. These were some of the things I naturally picked up along the way while growing up.

## An Unfortunate Turn of Events

When I was just a teenager, a business ran by my father and my uncle failed. Due to this, my father eventually had to sell off the house and our family moved into a one-room apartment. My mother was a flight stewardess then. One day, she came home jobless. She reached a certain age and was told to resign or move to another department. It was a tough time and it took ten years before we were able to come out of it.

True, we didn't lack the basic necessities, but unlike our peers, my sister and I didn't have computers and phones. I felt so strongly about this that it spurred me early on to keep going – to make sure this will not happen to my family in the future or to me again.

## Falling into Bad Company

During my adolescent years, my parents were busy trying to make ends meet. I was left to do whatever I wanted without proper guidance. Naturally, I drew closer to my friends and due to peer pressure, I ventured into all kinds of vices. I found myself devising all sorts of get-rich-quick schemes. I was more concerned about making it big as quickly as possible and less about the ethics of my actions. This caused a great deal of grief to the people I love the most.

## A Renewed Purpose

I usually read up or watched YouTube videos on business or entrepreneurship in order to make more well-informed decisions. Observing what happened to my mother, I didn't want to be fired from a job just because of age.

I had an opportunity to do an internship at Amara Hotel while I was still studying in Temasek Polytechnic. This job allowed me to meet many business travellers. From my interactions with them, it inspired me to do a business of my own. I didn't want to be constrained by a deskbound job; I wanted to do something that could make a difference in my industry or personal life.

The birth of Calvary Carpentry was symbolic. Other than incorporating it as a personal statement of my renewed purpose in life, "Cavalry" also refers to soldiers or warriors who fought mounted on horseback. It embodies the camaraderie spirit of going through thick and thin together as a team.

## The Turning Point

I reflected on my actions and came to realise that my younger sister and I were worlds apart. She is one year younger than me and our family couldn't afford to send her overseas to study back then. Yet, she managed to secure two scholarships on her own to pursue her tertiary education. I pondered, "*Both of us were brought up in the same family, so why did I turn out this way?*" Since I grew up with my sister and have known her for a very long time, she became my personal benchmark to keep myself in check. When I finally came to my senses, I immediately made a decision to change my life for the better and it started with finding a new group of friends who were able to show me right from wrong. This was also the same time I started Calvary Carpentry.

**"Through it all, I've learnt that in life, we either become bitter or better. I choose the latter because there's no point crying over spilled milk."**

**"I realised there are truly no shortcuts to success. If you want to cook, you'll need to first master the use of fire. If you want to paint, learn to hold a brush."**





## All Things Timber

Honestly, starting out wasn't easy. The greatest challenge faced was my age. Being the youngest in the industry, I wasn't taken seriously. They held certain prejudices against me. In order to overcome this major obstacle, I had to create good project references and learn how to carry myself well.

The first service we started off with was refurbishing timber floorings of sports halls and old house floors. All we had to do was to take the varnishing machine, set it down, and varnish the floor to make it look as good as new. We slowly expanded our service range to cover anything wood-related, except for furniture and cabinets as those are laminated plywoods.

Our company's vision is "*All Things Timber*".

Moving forward, we're working with SPRING Singapore in product development. Some examples of products in the pipeline include Ez-Rail, a railing system that allows carpenters to install and remove decks at half the usual speed and an automated height adjustable table called Calca.

Through it all, I've learnt that in life, we either become bitter or better. I choose the latter because there's no point crying over spilled milk.

From what I've experienced so far, I realised there are truly no shortcuts to success. If you want to cook, you'll need to first master the use of fire. If you want to paint, learn to hold a brush.



**PASSI**

*Passion is the fuel that keeps the fire  
within burning bright.*

As shared in earlier chapters, starting and running a business is no easy feat. In this final chapter, be inspired by these alumni entrepreneurs who **relentlessly pursue** their passions purposefully.

Ride along as they unfold stories of their passions turned into actions, and reflect on **how YOU can strive for the stars too.**

# ONATE

# A Love for Film Making

By Teo Hui Zhen & Raphael Lim

With over eight years of combined creative and production experience, we focus on working with brands and agencies to create visually exciting and meaningful content for the customers.

**Hui Zhen:** I discovered my passion for film making pretty early on. Since young, whenever the television was on, I'll be hooked. My parents were displeased with me for watching so much television programmes and movies. They never understood what was so interesting in that little box. My favourite past time growing up was watching movies with my friends.

After secondary school, I chose the polytechnic route and studied video and animation at Temasek Polytechnic design school. Choosing this course was one of the best decisions in my life. Polytechnic days were so enjoyable! There were no exams, just a lot of group projects, drawings, animations and experimenting with film. I loved music and naturally, joined the band as my co-curricular activity. As you can see, my interest has always been geared towards the arts and less towards studying.

**"I decided to find a job first and work towards my goal by taking up a few freelance videography jobs here and there. Before I knew it, the company was formed, even though I never planned to start a company of my own."**

**— Teo Hui Zhen**



Teo Hui Zhen (Left), Raphael Lim (Right)

## At the Crossroads

Before graduation, I pondered, “*What do I want to do next?*” Almost instantly, I thought of studying at a film making school abroad. I knew I couldn’t stop here. There was so much more to learn. The dream of living abroad on my own, being independent, immersing in another culture and making new friends was mesmerising. However, I realised that without money, I was just building castles in the air. With that, I decided to find a job first and work towards my goal by taking up a few freelance videography jobs here and there. Before I knew it, the company was formed, even though I never planned to start a company of my own.

What I had to overcome when I first started out was fear. “*What if I can’t make money? Will this business kill my passion? Can I make it on my own? What if there’s no one to turn to when I’m in trouble?*” There were so much uncertainty and so little faith. I consulted my family and a few close friends on this. After a week of deep thought, I plucked up the courage and took a leap of faith to start my company. I gave myself two years and if nothing good came out of it, I’d close it down and find a full-time job.

I had one partner and we formed a team of three to start this company. One year later, we roped in Raphael as our freelance designer to help with the growing requests from clients who wanted to do rebranding and graphic design work. It was really fun in the beginning and we shared a lot of great times together. Unfortunately, this didn’t last long.

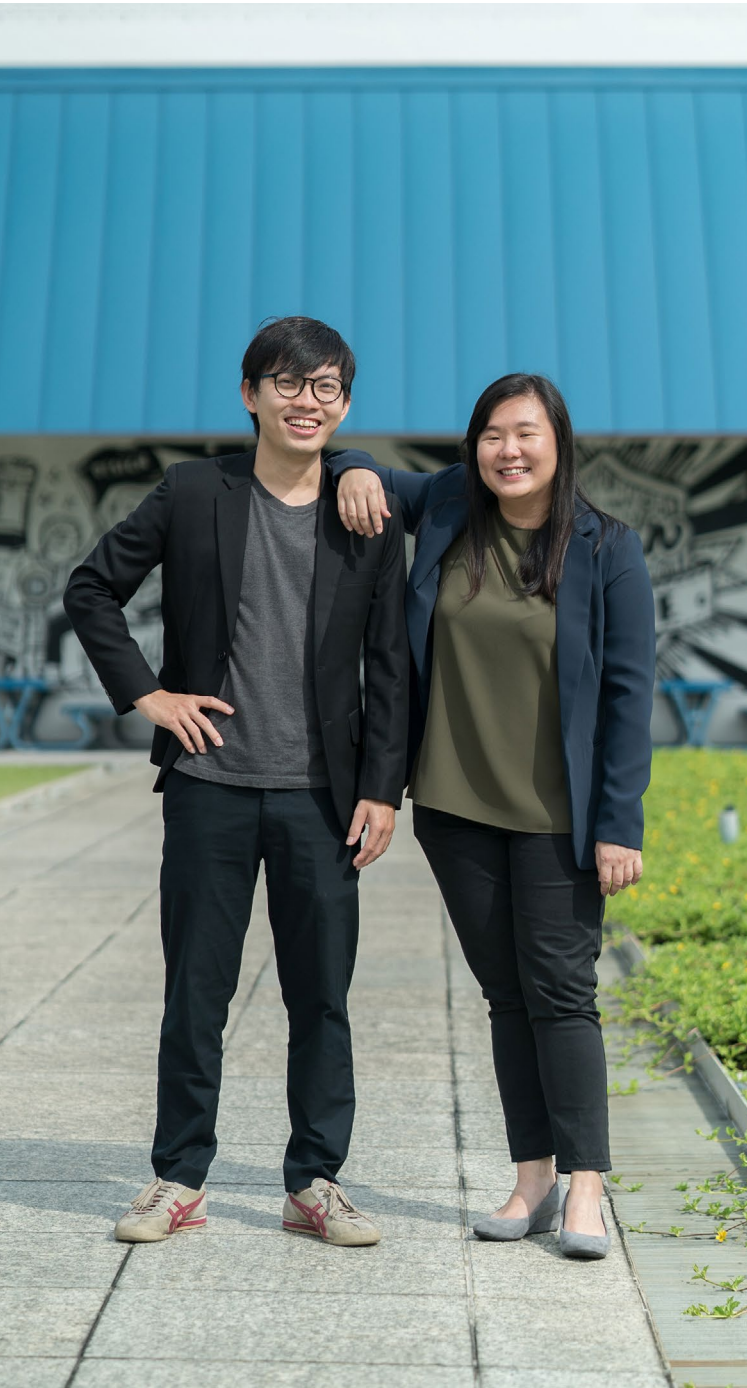
## The Biggest Challenge

In 2015, business was at its peak because we managed to secure some big clients and were able to command a higher price for our products and services. Our clients had higher expectations from us and we had to put in extra hours just to keep up with their demands. The stress snowballed and I was quarrelling with my business partner almost every day.

After several serious discussions, the both of us mutually agreed we had differing visions of the company and it was time for us to go our separate ways. As the formation of our company was a partnership, we had a dispute over the value of my partner’s stake in the company. In order to keep the business running, I had to pay out a sum of money to acquire her portion of the shares and this left a dent in our company’s finances. It was a painful and exhausting experience. I was hurt that she gave up and I felt abandoned, left all alone in the company.

What kept me going was my father. He was my role model. He’s hard working, honest and brave. Through him, I understood starting a company of my own was not going to be easy and that’s why I chose to continue on with this path. I’ll never know my limits unless I push myself.

It isn’t about being a boss. It’s about having the confidence to do what I wanted despite difficult circumstances. Running a business was exactly how hard I thought it’ll be. The only thing I didn’t know was how rewarding it would be while I worked to make my dream come true. This sense of satisfaction was the ultimate reward for me.



## Pulling Through Tough Times

**Raphael:** Back then, I didn't start out as their business partner but only as a freelancer working for them. Hui Zhen taught me to accept things as they were as some things were beyond our control. She reminded me to focus on what was important, which was to keep the company alive and remember why we did what we did in the first place. Putting this behind us, we pushed ourselves to work even harder to resolve the company's problems, one issue at a time. While the company was recovering from the financial setback, Hui Zhen and I forwent our salary payments for months till we were back on track.

It almost felt like we were rebuilding the company and hitting the "reset button" in business. We had to learn how to grow the company with minimal finances. Instead of raising capital or taking up a bank loan, we adopted a more traditional approach. We meticulously budgeted for equipment we needed to buy and slowly saved for it through the profits we had obtained from our projects. While saving to get our own equipment, we rented equipment on a daily basis just to get the job done for our clients.

As business picked up again, we started hiring people to come on board and today, we have three full-time staff working together for us.

**"Sometimes, you'll need to fail in order to succeed. I don't think there are any formulas for success. What's most important is to do what you love and do it without any expectations."**

— Raphael Lim



## A Different Perspective

Despite the initial struggles, I still keep a positive outlook in business and in life. With an innate interest in creative work and design, I always thought I'll be working for an advertising firm. Never have I imagined myself running a business or becoming a videographer. It was Hui Zhen's passion that inspired me.

I feel that she's different from the other entrepreneurs I know because she isn't profit-driven. Instead, she focuses more on building relationships, putting the company culture and the welfare of our staff and clients first. She's even willing to set aside some money from the company to spend on our staff just to make them happy. To her, it's not about making money from clients but how to build a long-lasting relationship with them.

I'm grateful I was able to work for her since the beginning. She was the one who gave me the opportunity to build my own portfolio in the field of design.

## The Next Stage in Business

I'm happy to be able to work alongside her now to build the business and take it to greater heights. We have an excellent rapport and I'm glad we're able to work well together.

We're proud to share that the business goals set out five years ago have already been achieved. To take things forward the next five years, the plan is to increase our headcount to about ten people, create a more closely knitted company culture, move into a bigger office and in due course, build our own studio. We intend to play a more supervisory role in the future, grooming more people who share the same passion as us in videography.

My advice for aspiring entrepreneurs is not to be afraid to make mistakes. Sometimes, you'll need to fail in order to succeed. I don't think there are any formulas for success. What's most important is to do what you love and do it without any expectations.



# An Eye for Design

By David Tham

StudioNorm has defined itself as a design consultancy focused on creating bespoke furniture, furnishings and interior architecture design for the hospitality industry.

You really need to have a genuine interest in arts and design. This way, you don't have to force yourself to search for interesting things. Everything around us is a source of inspiration. When you take a closer look and spend more time to understand the rationale of things every day, you'll never run out of creative ideas.

Exposure to relevant work in your field is important. Study what other people do, what they've done very well – that'll inspire you. You'll sit down and ponder, *"If they can do it, why can't I?"* Unlike the past, you can now easily get a ton of ideas at your fingertips. At your own time and pace, all you have to do is to open up a browser on your laptop or mobile phone and search for past design works from the internet. There's so much information out there.

**"I started out as a C student in my first year but as I grew to love what I was studying, my grades slowly improved to B's and A's in my final year."**

Cultivating such a habit is like building a knowledge library in your head. This enables you to retrieve creative solutions easily as you know something similar has already been done before during a client brief.



## Positive Reinforcement

I have inclinations towards creative and design elements but I would not say that I'm born talented. Architecture was my main interest but my grades weren't good enough for me to go through the junior college and university route. Product and industrial design in Temasek Polytechnic was actually my second choice.

I started out as a C student in my first year but as I grew to love what I was studying, my grades slowly improved to B's and A's in my final year. The reason my passion developed can be attributed to the rewards attained when I did well. It felt like an endorsement for me to stay in the field of creative design. This was the momentum that kept me going and to further my studies, pursuing a master's degree in design. It was at Temasek Polytechnic where my passion for design was nurtured and it helped me find my direction in life.



## A Helping Hand

Starting a business of my own in the arena of design has always been at the back of my mind. But I didn't know what to expect as I didn't have prior business knowledge. I headed back to Temasek Polytechnic for help and to learn what I needed to know to get my company up and running.

Alice from the then Entrepreneurship Centre guided me through the business planning process and recommended the “*Young Entrepreneur Startup Fund*”. Ernest and Vanni, my lecturers from the Design School, provided guidance, mentorship and assistance to refine the business idea. My mother and elder sister also chipped in as well, lending me some money as seed capital. It was with all these supports and funding that I finally started my company in 2009.

## Memorable Experiences

We started out in the hospitality industry, designing setups and displays for furnishings, decorations and centrepieces, just to name a few. Soon, word got around the industry, and we were able to slowly gain a foothold in this space.

I still remember our first customer, Mr Raymond Ang from Mandarin Orchard. Back then, it was called Meritus Mandarin Hotel. I originally didn't know him or the company but decided to reach out to them anyway by sending an introductory email about my company. To my surprise, he responded and invited us down to do a presentation. He loved our proposed prototypes so much that he placed an order on the spot. At that moment, I walked out of the room with a sense of accomplishment and it justified my decision to start this venture.

As a young company, I had my fair share of challenges. Without any business background, it was difficult to handle the day to day operations of running a company. Things such as basic administration, legal matters, governance and maintaining financial documents were alien to me. I didn't even know basic things such as issuing a quotation, invoice or delivery note.

Due to this, prospective clients knew we were inexperienced and some of them took advantage of us. They came in and asked us to design. Being young, naïve and passionate, we went to work right away thinking that they'll be our next client. After sending them multiple designs, we didn't hear from them again. A few months later, I went down to their place to follow-up and saw our designs there. What they did was to get ideas, concepts and drawings free of charge from us and engaged their own contractors to fabricate the designs. This taught me to never to pour myself outright at the start. Work on a few proposals and get a confirmation first before going all in. I had to learn it the hard way.

**“By having your own label, it’s free play. I like this path as it helps us to create our own identity better, allowing us to interpret and express our own ideas creatively.”**

## Refresh and Recharge

When times are good, no one complains and everybody enjoys the ride. However, during bad times such as what we’ve been experiencing in the past few years, you’ll start to worry. The recent economic slowdown affected our business and typical concerns of every business owner will be areas like cash flow and recurring operational costs. The mental stress can be unbearable. Sometimes, worry keeps me up all night. Now and then I’ll even question myself, *“Why am I working so hard? Might as well work for somebody and draw a salary, right?”*

The key to handling internal turmoil like this is to learn how to shut off. Know the limit and stop to refresh and recharge. Of course, this is easier said than done. To me, work is life and life is work, I would like to continue this way but a line has to be drawn to prevent myself from a burnout.

To get my mind off work, I indulge in some personal hobbies such as playing soccer, going to the gym, diving or serving in church. As a person of faith, I pray to God; He is my utmost help at all times and in all circumstances. These activities help me to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

I know tough times don’t last but tough people do. This difficult period is just a short phase in comparison to the next twenty to thirty years in business. By learning how to rest and relax from time to time, it helps me to be a better problem solver.



## Freedom to Create

We have an in-house label called Normform. It’s a range of furniture and products created by us. When you provide a service, you might have to adhere to guidelines and restrictions. By having your own label, it’s free play. I like this path as it helps us to create our own identity better, allowing us to interpret and express our own ideas creatively. It’s comforting to know that this line of product has been well received by our clients and we’re doing much more to develop it into a personal brand.

# TOP

## Notch Service

By Adler Poh

Adler Singapore is the brainchild of Adler Poh. An avid posh back-packer in his youth, Adler created his brand of hospitality – providing customers with premium co-living accommodation right in the heart of the city.



I attempted suicide twice before the age of ten years old. Never was I academically inclined since young as I've always done badly in studies. Back then, school grades meant everything in the context of an Asian family. To make matters worse, I was constantly compared to my cousin, a year my junior, who was used as a benchmark. He was the "model child", portrayed by his mother as some sort of "super kid" to the rest of my relatives. He did way better than me in every aspect of life. Imagine the torment I had to go through every weekend when I went to my grandmother's house for dinner. I, the older one, was compared with a younger cousin. It felt very demeaning, especially at such a fragile age. I always felt inferior to him. As a kid, I couldn't understand why they were doing this to me.

**"My childhood memories were mostly about folding and flying my paper planes, throwing parachute soldiers down the balcony and playing volleyball."**

Self-doubt and depression crept in as there was a lot of pressure on my shoulders. I felt unworthy to be part of this family. I started leaving suicide notes around the house. Thankfully, my mother and grandmother found them in time. My mother had a long talk with me, counselling

me but that didn't stop me from attempting suicide again. After a second attempt which failed as well, I came to realise that dying wasn't an option. I had to find a way out of this negative thought pattern on my own in order to triumph over my current circumstance. There was only so low I could go and I was already at the lowest point. The only way left to go was up and that was exactly what I did. From then on, I started to do more of the things I liked and did them very well. Slowly, I became more confident and picked myself up from there. This episode of my life provided a strong anchor to whatever I did thereafter. I'll usually find something I enjoy doing, do it really well and to the best of my ability until it reached perfection.

## Luxury Hostel

When I was studying in Temasek Polytechnic, I had the chance to intern with Cathay Pacific in their marketing department and so I knew exactly how the media works. I couldn't create any standard product since people wouldn't be interested. There's also no point in creating something just for the sake of doing it. I needed to tap on what I was good at, and create something different and unique. All the while, I was staying true to my values and philosophies of life. This was especially important because the business will carry my name on it.

After thinking it through, I decided to start a luxury hostel. My father was one of the first few people I approached for a loan but he didn't entertain my idea initially. That didn't bother me much and I kept working on this idea. Six months later, my father could tell I was serious about this business so he said to me, *"Pass me your proposal and let me check it out."* After looking through my business plan, he gave me the green light to go ahead and I borrowed half a million from my parents to launch Adler Luxury Hostel in 2012. We were Singapore's first ever luxury hostel located in Chinatown and this concept gained a lot of publicity for us. In a short span of two years, we expanded by 120%. In the following year, I was able to repay my parents in full while I converted everything else into personal bank loans under my name.

## A Day Dreamer

Growing up, I was always known as the "aloof one" by my mother; maybe it was because I was the middle child. My childhood memories were mostly about folding and flying my paper planes, throwing parachute soldiers down the balcony and playing volleyball. In school, I was always alone. I didn't feel weird being a loner. In fact, I actually enjoyed it. I was always in my own world dreaming of things. At home in my room, I would pull over some chairs, use my bed sheet to cover them and imagine I was building a castle. It was all about embracing life and having fun with it. I wasn't the typical boy that loved sports a whole lot and I warmed up to people really slowly. My parents noticed this early on and gave me a lot of room to explore what I truly enjoyed doing.

Growing up in a hospitality-focused family, my world revolved around airlines, hotels and restaurants. I loved the tourism sector and knew from an early age this was the industry I wanted to be in. I've never once doubted my passion.

***"To continuously stay ahead of competition and remain as the first-mover in my market niche, I had to constantly look at the core of my business — our customers. What do they want? What do they need? Evolve and innovate in a way that caters to them."***

## Soul of the Company

To continuously stay ahead of the competition and remain as a first-mover in my market niche, I had to constantly look at the core of my business – our customers. What do they want? What do they need? Evolve and innovate in a way that caters to them. This was to ensure the longevity of the company. I had to be very certain of our own product, be aware of the customers' growing demands and made sure that we meet or even exceed our customers' expectations. This is really the soul of the company that differentiates us from the rest.

Moving forward, we're currently relooking into our product and service offerings. Due to the word "*luxury*", some customers had a mismatch of expectations. We've noticed this recently so we're planning to undergo a re-branding exercise. Our observation showed that customers we have attracted are usually business travellers, especially technopreneurs and digital nomads. They appreciate the environment we have because it allows them to thrive at work and we love that. We want to embrace this group of customers so we are catering more to them. In the near future, we'll be ready to implement a full spectrum of offering for the new Adler brand, and I'm excited!





# Food Sustainability

By Lionel Wong & Terence Tan

We are a Singapore-based indoor farming technology company. Our aim is to provide farmers of any level of experience to scale up by providing them with the tools and knowledge to grow healthy, sustainable food for local communities and run a commercially-viable operation.



Terence Tan (Left), Lionel Wong (Right)

**Lionel:** *“Are you crazy? Farming? Are you serious? You studied so much and now you want to be a farmer?”* This was the common response Terence and I received when we told the people around us what we had planned to do.

Both of us studied in Brisbane, Australia for three years and were housemates. Over there, we had a lot of time and a nice environment to think about crazy things to do after graduation. We loved food. While studying abroad, we had the opportunity to cook and eat the local produce there and they were so tasty, flavourful and fresh.

We also chanced upon companies in the cannabis industry. How could they harvest these crops without any sunlight? How did they create an artificial environment to grow these plants? It was intriguing for the both of us who have come from a biotechnology background.

**“We went abroad to learn from our overseas partners and friends who were experienced in what we were planning to do. We forged a very extensive network of business partnerships internationally and learnt from each other continually.”**

**— Lionel Wong**

## Growing Our Own Crops

When we returned to Singapore, the first thing we did was to go to the supermarket to buy food, hoping to find that same taste. Unfortunately, we failed. That made us wonder why, since the food we bought was imported from Australia as well. We had a discussion about this at a nearby hawker centre over a few glasses of beer and thought, “*Hey, why don’t we grow our own crops?*” With that idea in mind, we rigorously started our business planning process, meeting once a week to discuss fresh ideas. Within six months, we officially started our business – Upgrown Farming Asia.

In the beginning, few people actually knew what indoor farming was all about in Singapore. We had a very steep learning curve as there was nobody to learn from locally or to mentor us. There was no support structure and ecosystem for a new industry like this. Regulatory roadblock and manpower issues were also major challenges we had to deal with. The local market wasn’t ready for what we had to offer. We were too early, yet we couldn’t just sit around all day in the office waiting for business to come. It was necessary for us to go out there to make things happen.

We went abroad to learn from our overseas partners and friends who were experienced in what we were planning to do. We forged a very extensive network of business partnerships internationally and learnt from each other continually. Terence and I worked close to twenty hours every day. I could recall many times that I only had five dollars in my bank account. It was tough during the initial phase to say the least. Nonetheless, I know our hard work has paid off because today, the international community we’ve built over the years has now become our greatest strength.



## A Love for Food

**Terence:** Since young, I always wanted to be in Agriculture, especially aquaculture. The reason why I wanted to get into farming stems from my love for food, especially seafood. I have to make sure I get to enjoy this “hobby” for as long as I live and the only way to achieve that is to farm and produce it myself. My ambition was always to be a farmer. The closest course I could find in Temasek Polytechnic back then was Biotechnology because the Agrotechnology course I wanted to apply for had to close down due to a lack of students.

Singapore imports most of the food we eat. We depend on other countries for our food. While we were in Australia, there were conversations on how to cut exports of food as there was not enough to support their own local population. What would happen to Singapore then if one day, countries stopped exporting their food produce? With climate change and an increasing world population, it's a real possibility that we might face this problem. It's about food security and as Singaporeans, it's our responsibility to do something about it.

**“We always remind ourselves of the purpose and reason why we started this company. For us, it's about food security as a nation. We want to ensure that the food our friends and family are eating every day is of high quality and nutritious”**

— Terence Tan

## The Concept of Urban Farming

The concept of urban farming simply means farming in available spaces in the urban environment. It can range from small plots of land to rooftops or even built-up spaces. We specialise in controlled-environment agriculture, more commonly referred to as “indoor farming”.

We make use of utilised indoor spaces such as warehouses and factories and turn them into farms to grow food. Vertical gardening is also another method of growing that allows plants to extend upwards rather than just growing along the horizontal surface of a garden. As we control the growing environment, we're able to grow plants all year round regardless of the seasons and independent of the climate outside. As such, we can grow crops our local climate can't grow. Growing indoors would also allow us to enjoy seasonal produce all year round.

As countries become more developed and populations grow, there will be increased competition for land use. Arable fertile lands are often lost to urban developments. As cities become urbanised, having space is a luxury. Growing in indoor spaces allows us to grow more in much smaller spaces. By “tricking” the plants so they can't differentiate night from day, we're able to speed up their growing process from three days to one. With this, we only require two hundred square metres of space to produce as many vegetables as a two-acre farm.

Manpower is limited and hard to find in urbanised societies so we make use of technologies such as remote monitoring and automation to resolve this issue. We aim to make farming cool and fun. You can do the job of a farmer mainly by monitoring the conditions from a screen in the comfort of your own air-conditioned home or office.

Right now, we're often invited to attend local and overseas trade shows and exhibitions. We also co-organise conferences to bring like-minded people from all over

the world together to learn from one another. Through these events, we network to share our knowledge and experiences, with the hope of generating more awareness for our company and the work we do in our industry.

## Food Sustainability

Although starting your own business has its perks such as the freedom to be more creative with the way you work and the room to explore how something can be done better, our journey since we started has never been a bed of roses. There were times where the roads were rough and it was during times like these when Lionel and I questioned our decision to do this. *“Why did we make life difficult for ourselves when we could actually be enjoying the weekends with our loved ones and at the same time, getting a good pay cheque?”* But the tough just gets going until the job is done.

We always remind ourselves of the purpose and reason why we started this company. For us, it's about food security as a nation. We want to ensure that the food our friends and family are eating every day is of high quality and nutritious. This keeps us going even though the industry we are in is far from glamorous.



# Hobby into Business

By David Wee

Wee's Collection started as a company that traded and leased vintage and antique items. As demand for heritage and retro-themed events grew, we subsequently branched into event planning & organising. Today, we've established ourselves as a one-stop station for all heritage and event-related needs.

Prior to starting my business, I was with the civil service for two years, my first job after graduating from university. I've always been someone who loves interacting with a lot of people and consider myself an extrovert.

I've been a collector for close to twenty years. What piqued my interest in vintage items were the weekly visits with my father to Sungei Road when I was only fourteen years old. I bought my first F&N orange glass there. Over the years, there were a few memorable pieces I've collected, including items that were passed down from our old family home in Joo Chiat. My most prized collection is a 1958 F&N Commemorative Glass that I have acquired from a garage sale. The glass belonged to a collector who had passed on and his family members were selling off his items. It was also this glass collection that aroused my interest in our nation's heritage.

Before even starting this business, I was already selling vintage items on online platforms such as Ebay and Gumtree. Back then, it was more of a hobby rather than a job. The idea to start this as a business was purely by chance. After leaving my job as a civil servant, I was in a transition stage, pondering what to do next. Coincidentally, I was approached by Joo Chiat Community Centre to lend them some of my items for their heritage night event. This sparked the idea of turning my hobby into a business and I have never looked back since.

**“Although we know and love what we do, the people out there must know what we are doing too. For a niche industry, **continual advertising** is very important.”**

I started out operating this business with my own personal collection and savings. The earlier years were tough as nobody knew who we were. I bought an old van and together with my wife, both of us went knocking on doors at Community Centres, event companies and cafes to promote our business.



## The Challenges Ahead

The three main challenges we faced were sourcing for vintage items, getting people to know us and business expansion.

Getting our supply of vintage items was always a challenge. We had to continuously build on our networks and work with fellow dealers and collectors so we can source for fresh, old items. As supplies of such items were limited, we had to seize the opportunity whenever we received news of someone moving house to see if we could find any hidden treasures there. Occasionally, I'll also had to make trips to Malaysia to network with dealers there.

**"I enjoy what I do so much that every day doesn't feel like a working day at all. As an entrepreneur, I receive 150% satisfaction in what I do."**

Although we know and love what we do, the people out there must know what we are doing too. For a niche industry, continual advertising is very important. We relied on both online marketing channels such as Facebook, and offline ones such as newspaper write-ups to promote our business. We also participated in exhibitions. Working closely with fellow dealers also helps as the vintage community in Singapore is small and it's a good chance to learn from those who have been in the market for many years.

Aside from trading and renting vintage items, we've also moved into event management, specifically managing events with heritage-related themes such as kampong games, childhood snacks or even a vintage weddings.

## Buying, Selling & Renting Memories

I enjoy what I do so much that every day doesn't feel like a working day at all. As an entrepreneur, I receive 150% satisfaction in what I do. Every day, I jump out of bed enthusiastically looking forward to new challenges. From planning for an event to meeting up with a potential client, I learn something new each time. It's not an easy journey but it's extremely rewarding to see how the business has grown over the years.

To me, every vintage item has a story behind it. For many, these items may just be junk, waiting to be thrown out. I love doing heritage-related events as it provides me with an opportunity to bring my items out to be showcased in public. If I leave the items at home, I'll be the only one appreciating them. It's always very satisfying to see many people reminiscing fond memories through my vintage items. They can also teach the younger generation about what life was like in the past.

## Preserving Singapore's National Heritage

Singapore is already very developed and we have lost a lot of our heritage over the years. The younger generation today might not know what a public coin phone is or might not have drunk a soft drink from a glass bottle. It's important for them to learn and understand about our nation's heritage so that they can better appreciate what we have today. Otherwise, everything will be forgotten one generation down the road.





## Be "GARANG"

For aspiring entrepreneurs who plan to turn their hobbies into a business, my advice is to be "GARANG". Go for your passion and develop it. Have a "Never-say-die Spirit". Adapt and evolve. Never stop learning and ensure your business is sustainable. Always be prepared for change. Stay reliable, never short-change your customers and deliver on your promises. Advertise your business and put yourself out there to network. Lastly, go for opportunities. They don't look for you, you'll have to look for them!

I'm thankful for supportive family members like my wife who continuously supports me in my business, spurring me to think out of the box. I'm also grateful to my father who till this day, allows me to use his house to run my business.

## Be "GARANG"

- **GO** for your passion and develop it. Have the "Never-say-die Spirit"
- **ADAPT** & Evolve: Never Stop Learning
- **RELIABLE**: Never short-change your customers
- **ADVERTISE**: Advertise, Advertise
- **NETWORK**: You never know who's who
- **GO** for Opportunities: They don't look for you, you look for them!

# The Journey Continues...

IN CONCLUSION:

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line but that's far from reality for entrepreneurs. This analogy was the inspiration of the book cover design by student illustrator Wenn Ki, from Temasek Polytechnic School of Design: *“Entrepreneurs start out as a single straight line, symbolising their sole focus of achieving something great. However, the line slowly becomes tangled up through the numerous challenges the entrepreneurs face along the course of their journey. As time passes, they learn to work it out, emerging stronger and sturdier, like the strokes on each letter of the book title.”*

Samuel Ang, the director of Temasek Polytechnic's Innovation & Entrepreneurship Centre shared his take on what entrepreneurship is. *“An entrepreneurial mindset encompasses having a compelling belief in one's vision and possessing a passion towards personal endeavour. Being unfazed by failures and empowered by challenges, one must have a heightened self-awareness and the mental tenacity to always be a curious learner and be inspired by the success of others.”* He personally believes that *“A successful entrepreneur is someone who is able to sustain or exceed his or her personal life goals through this endeavour. Be it mental, physical, spiritual or material, as long as one is able to overcome these obstacles during their entrepreneurial pursuit, that's success.”*

Samuel concluded with these words of wisdom, *“One will never know when they'll need to lean on their entrepreneurial mindset and skills, either by choice or by circumstance during their lifetime. As such, this mindset is crucial in life.”* The alumni entrepreneurs in this book have leveraged their entrepreneurial mindsets of innovation, ambition and resilience in their passions to achieve personal success. Their journey continues. The question you have to ask yourself now is – do you have what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur?

It all starts with being **BOLD**.

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This book is jointly produced by the Innovation & Entrepreneurship Department and the Student Development and Alumni Affairs Department of Temasek Polytechnic.

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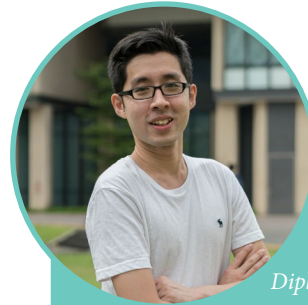
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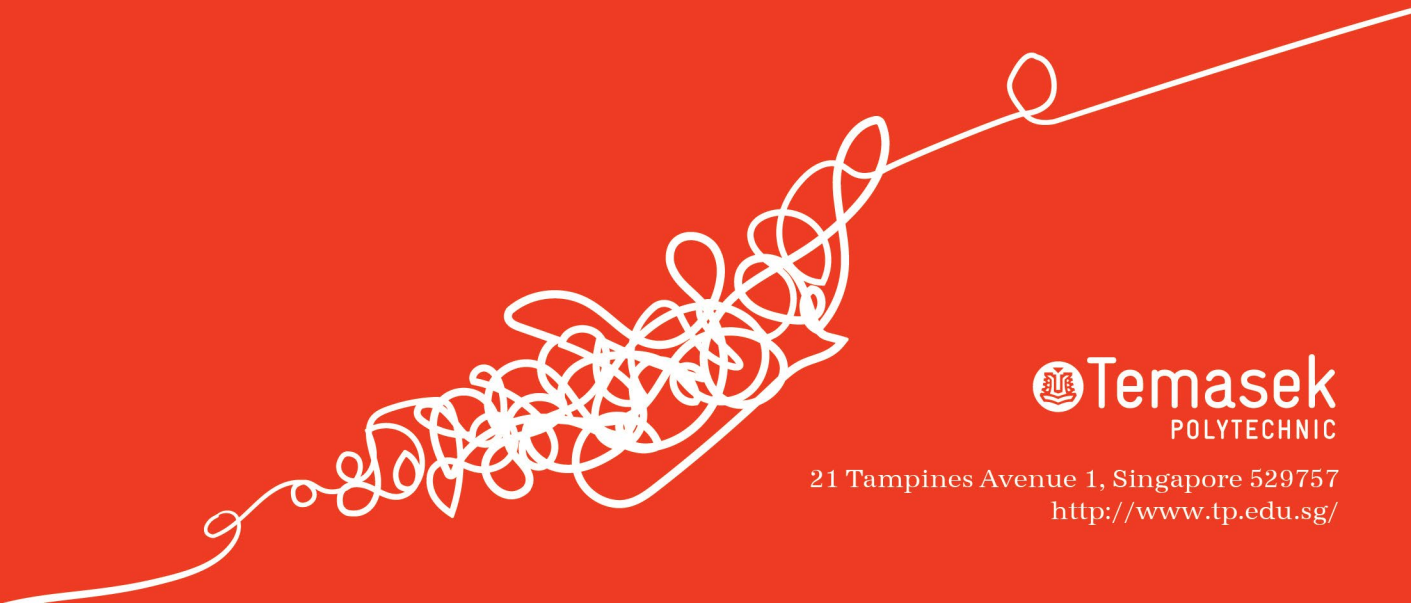
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