



EXCELLENCE EXPLORED

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1

COVER STORY

Eunyce Yap and Joanna Lam, Founders of fashion label, Love & Bravery, tell us why there should always be more to business than just the bottom line.

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OUR INSPIRATION

Traditional structures are crumbling under the crushing weight of legacy and nostalgia. Restlessness abounds. The bold and courageous, aching to make their mark and break out of the old. To create something that would move the soul.

Nimble and quickened by the speed of change. Sensitive to the needs and preferences of the tired consumer, waiting to be inspired and excited. Often ahead of trends before they come to light. Creating demand where there was none. Repurposing the old and giving new expressions to the tried and tested. Challenging the norm and pushing boundaries that collectively shape and add layers of textures to our very own service fabric.

Welcome to Excellence Explored.

Discover the stories of small businesses and entrepreneurs who have broken away from corporate life, previous occupations, or industry norms to offer their own brand of differentiated experiences. Follow the journey of how these individuals have found their own unique concepts, applied creativity to grow their customer base, and navigated challenges along the way to gain a foothold in the Singapore service landscape.

The editorial style we have adopted for this publication reflects our ambition to capture the candour of conversations. We want to express our heartfelt appreciation to these generous individuals who have given us their time and demonstrated such openness in sharing their personal stories with us.

ELEMENTAL CONNECTIONS



Silas Lee, Founder of COO Boutique Hostel, weighs in on the role of technology in customer service and how face-to-face relationships trump all.



“I’m very old-school,” declares Silas Lee, Founder and CEO of COO Boutique Hostel, as we quizzically eye our surroundings: edgy black walls, overhead neon lights, metallic room dividers done in the style of heritage breeze blocks.

We are sitting in a corner of the hostel's bistro — which doubles as an informal lounge area for hostel guests — and it's clear he senses our scepticism. “This is all a facade. All these designs will come and go. Many hotels and hostels emphasise the technology or design but these only give you instant gratification. I'm always mindful that hospitality is ever changing, and the one thing that never goes out of style is that human touch. COO seems cool and fun, but what we're trying to do is to get people to sit down, share a drink, and strike up a friendship.”

Silas turned 52 earlier this year. Before he was abruptly retrenched at 50, he was heading the most profitable portfolio of a leading international investment bank. The loss was destabilising: the man had spent 25 years in the industry — he calls himself a “career banker” — and overnight he had become jobless with a family of two young children, bank loans, and a mortgage in his name. But despite his lack of experience in hospitality, despite being offered return opportunities in banking, Silas devoted his entire life's savings into developing COO, an unprecedented hybrid of affordable bunks, luxuriously designed facilities, and, most importantly, a rapidly disappearing *kampong* spirit.

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I talk about issues with the staff almost every day, and they give me direct feedback from their operational perspectives.

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Silas, COO is premised on “Asian hospitality sensibility.” What is that exactly?

So, in Europe, the communal aspect of hostel accommodations is about drinking and partying — DJs and live music. But that concept can't be replicated in Asia because it's not in our nature. There are designated spaces for letting your hair down, like at music festivals, but not in a context like this.

While our space looks very SoHo — very New York bar — we don't actively push the space by hosting DJs. Our guests enjoy the space, but their primary objective is to explore Singapore. They want to see as much as they can while travelling, so we've branded our hospitality differently.

How would you describe COO's service then?

I have two words — human touch. There's this saying: when you pay peanuts, you get monkeys. We don't believe that. We always aim to add little human touches to everything we do.

For example, most hostels close their check-in counter after midnight so guests have to check themselves in if they arrive in the middle of the night. We provide 24/7 front desk service, and just like they do at hotels, a guest relations officer personally leads each guest to the room.

Yeah, many reviews describe your service as friendly and helpful. Do you have a training process?



You know, service isn't just about what the customers want; it's also about how to sustainably meet these needs, and sometimes the things they want can be difficult to achieve operationally. Finding

that balance is how you improve your service. Once you implement those types of solutions, you hear fewer customer complaints of the issue because the team knows how to react when they're faced with the problem. They can even learn to anticipate the problem.

We're a small team and close to one another, so we use instant feedback and informal dialogue instead of a structured training programme. I talk about issues with the staff almost every day, and they give me direct feedback from their operational perspectives. Together we analyse feedback from reviews to immediately improve our processes.

Not every issue starts off as a service issue. They sometimes begin as an operational issue, but we realise the solutions to these operational difficulties often become a service plus for the customers. When we developed the COO brand, we also developed a brand bible, which contains information about everything from how we address our customers to our uniforms. We've updated the bible with all these learning experiences, so after just a year of



operations, I can proudly say about 80-85% of our SOPs are well run. The best part of all this is the service culture is embedded in the staff because it's been a joint effort.

That's such an achievement, wouldn't you say? So many business owners have difficulties with manpower.

To me, the biggest battle is the battle of the heart — your team has to buy into the business philosophy. I think we've won that. It wasn't always like this, though.

We started with many misunderstandings, but both sides took the time to explain our own perspectives. I'm mindful of the fact that I don't have hospitality experience while some of them have been working in the industry for years. By talking things through, they could better understand what guests expect while I could see the constraints they were working with.

The worst thing a business owner can do is to ignore their staff's comments. We recently had an issue where we started receiving enquiries through Facebook.



Our team works all day but still had to answer these queries late at night. They told me how it was beginning to be a problem, so we talked to some NUS students who had developed a chatbot programme. We worked with them to programme the chatbot with automatic responses to questions we typically receive on Facebook. Now the team gets to sleep peacefully at night while customers get immediate answers to their queries.

Are you a proponent of using technology in customer service?

So much of the argument for technology is to increase productivity, but that's only one side of the equation. A lot of us forget about the other side: how does technology affect your value proposition to your customers? You must understand the staff's productivity gain is often the customer's loss because they now have to perform tasks the staff used to do.

I don't want to be critical, but I think service is really about human connections. I used to visit this Japanese restaurant all the time, but I stopped after they automated their processes — from queuing to ordering — because I think automation adversely affected the wait staff's attitudes.

Sure, technology is the way forward, and I am committed to streamlining our operations for our staff, but the more I do that, the more I want to emphasise the human touch of COO. This is something I always tell my team. I believe the power of technology is to take away mundane work so that staff can perform value-added responsibilities like paying attention to customers. The reason we incorporate automation is to free up their time so they can chat to guests, make trip recommendations, find out how their stay is going. Because at the end of their trip, guests won't remember how comfortable the bed was or how nice the space looked. They're going to remember the person they connected with. ♦



THE FUTURE OF LOCAL FOOD

◆ Restaurateurs Lee Eng Su and Lee Chan Wai share their views on Singapore's hawker food culture and how they want to change Singapore's food industry.

There are many negative assumptions about Singapore's F&B industry; many of them are accurate. The industry doesn't pay well; there is little career growth; the hours are long; there are no safety nets. But the team behind The Coconut Club is determined to make headway in this space.

"Cooking is a thankless career in Singapore," explains Lee Eng Su, co-founder of the restaurant, "but there are two things we can do: provide careers for cooks that will allow them to be successful early in their lives, and improve the standard of local food."

Eng Su and co-partner, Lee Chan Wai, are impressively committed to their cause. They refer to their team as family and frequently raise the idea of creating a safe space for their family at work. Two hours after lunch service, we find ourselves sitting in on a staff debriefing session, where they're taking turns to discuss everything from how they're feeling to a difficult situation that had happened during service. Tips and ideas are exchanged freely. Jokes are made; guidance is shared. It is clear this team has real camaraderie.

You've known each other for over 20 years. What made you decide to go into the Nasi Lemak business together?

Eng Su (ES): I moved back three or four years ago and was frustrated with Singapore's hawker food culture. Wages haven't increased for 20 years while the cost of living has gone up. Hawkers are still

selling food at very low prices and people expect local food to be cheap – \$30 for ramen is no problem; \$10 for *bak chor mee* is unacceptable. I eventually came to the conclusion that talk is cheap. If I want to change the way things are, I have to have a viable business selling quality local food and charging appropriately to show it can be done.

I never thought *nasi lemak* was a great dish until Chan brought me to the *nasi lemak* convention in Kuala Lumpur in 2014. I was blown away by how highly executed Malaysian *nasi lemak* is. In Malaysia, *nasi lemak* isn't a dish; it's a cuisine. I was cooking French and Mediterranean food at the time and I came to realise that Malay cuisine is probably one of the world's greatest cuisines.

But there's more to a restaurant than its food, right? What about your service?

Chan Wai (CW): We're fairly casual but we work hard in the background. The experience is like welcoming someone into your own home. Everyone understands that concept: you want guests to have a good time. You want them to taste the food and understand the effort you've put in without forcing it on them. We share this same sense of purpose whether young or old.

Have you formalised your training process?

ES: The training has evolved. At the beginning we went on about philosophy, but we also wanted our service to be sincere. We think that's lacking in Singapore — they're professional, courteous, kind... but they're not emotionally involved.



So we encourage our staff to be themselves — they don't have to fake a spiel about the food if they're naturally shy. And we empower them — they don't have to be submissive if a customer is rude or offensive.

Is that what you mean by sincerity in service? That there's no standard approach?

CW: Well, we did explore having set responses to everything at one point. We still have a bit of that, but if you're going to let your servers use their personalities to win people over, then you can't have too many standard phrases. Our approach comes down to communication. For example, we might not be serving *Kueh Salat* today because the coconuts weren't up to scratch, but the front-of-house team is responsible for delivering that message in their own way.

ES: Sincerity has an emotional starting point. Most companies start from a technical point

like KPIs — qualitative or quantitative indicators that are determined in numbers. But our team is like family to us, so we start with things like love, generosity, forgiveness, and the general bonding between staff. Using these tools allows for deep personal growth, which naturally translates to great, authentic service.





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We're not just bosses. We have extensive pre- and post-service briefings where we sit for almost an hour to talk.

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How else do you keep the team motivated?

ES: I believe laziness is a symptom, not a character trait. If someone is lazy, it's because they haven't felt motivated in the right way, so showing them respect and love is important. We trust them with who we are — we show them our own pain.

We're not just bosses. We have extensive pre- and post-service briefings where we sit for almost an hour to talk. At the beginning of service we talk about how we feel, and after service we check in with them again.

CW: Yeah, we also spend a lot of time coaching them on professionalism. We teach them that there is joy and satisfaction in doing a good job even when they're in a bad mood. We involve them in decision-making and set examples for them whether in the kitchen or in our interactions with suppliers and customers. They take their cues from us.

ES: We also spend equal effort with everyone to bring them together and create opportunities to socialise outside of work.

Like taking the team to the *nasi lemak* convention?

CW: Yeah, a lot of people think it was ridiculous that we opened on 22nd October and closed the entire restaurant on 4th November to take everyone away

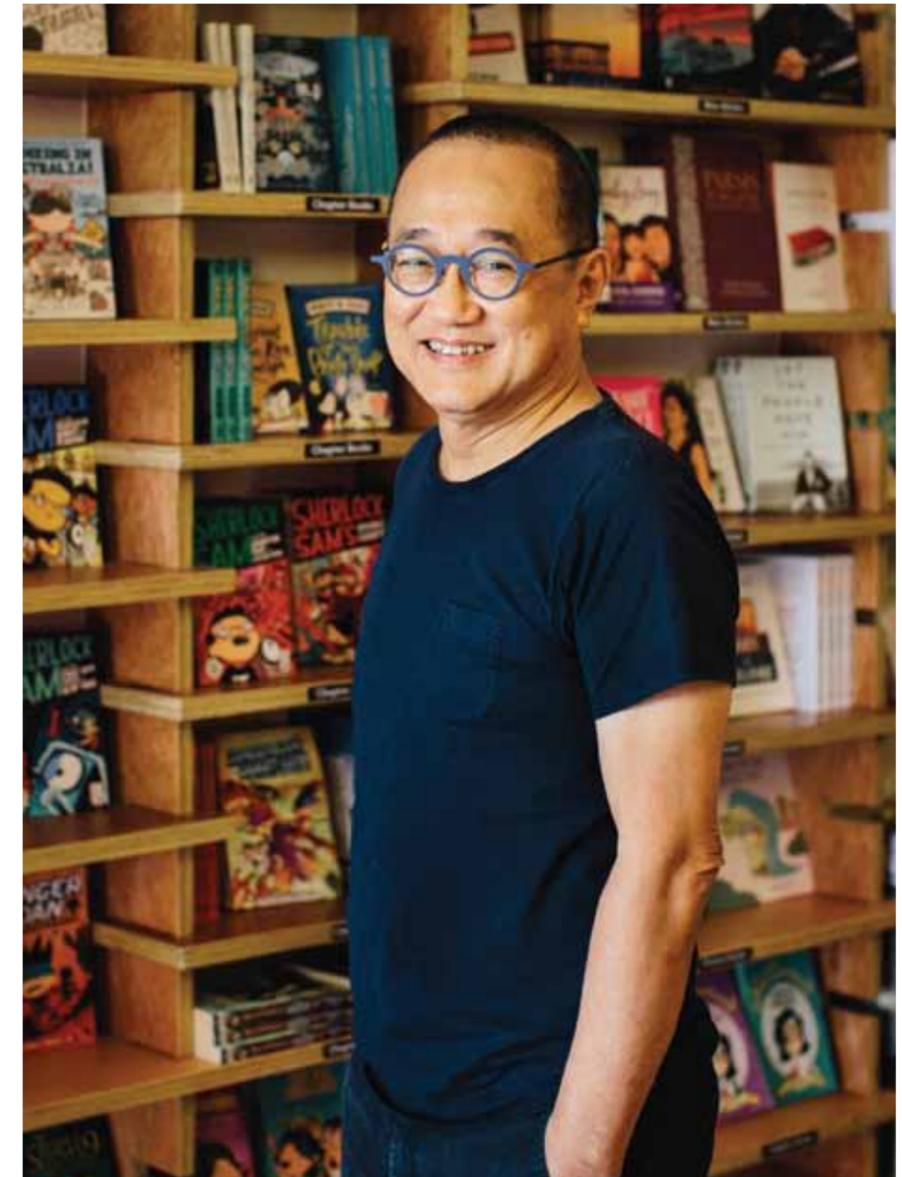
for the weekend. But what better way to translate the experience we had at the *nasi lemak* convention than to take them there!

ES: We're not trying to motivate them so we make money. We've given some of them two raises in a few months and three rounds of bonuses since we opened. They also have the freedom to say anything to us. We want them to know that this is a safe place to work and we take their careers seriously. The trust we've built is like a family's. We work for them and they work for us.

A few weeks ago, one of our waitresses was asked if she was the boss by a guest. When she said no, the guest questioned why she looked so happy and motivated when she wasn't in charge. That was a huge compliment to us. The motivation and level of execution become apparent when staff take ownership of the service.

It's our collective ambition to continue to create spaces in Singapore where real human interactions can exist on a level that's sincere and generous. Restaurants are the best setting for this and bringing our staff along for the journey is everything. ✦

SUSTAINING SINGAPORE'S STORIES



✦ *Edmund Wee of Epigram Books considers the importance of local literature and his commitment to nurturing local storytellers.*

“You have a nation that hasn’t been brought up on reading stories,” concedes Edmund Wee, Founder of Epigram Books. “Here, people don’t talk about books. When they do, it’s usually a foreign book.”

Edmund is the sort of patriot a country needs but doesn’t always appreciate. Critical of bureaucracy and the Government’s regimental approach to building an appreciation for local literature, he has devoted the last few years of his work to broadening our national narratives and revolutionising the novel-writing environment for Singapore writers. His publishing company, Epigram Books, now offers the most prize-money fiction writers can be awarded in the country. In 2017, the prizewinner will be awarded \$25,000 — five times the amount of the biennial Singapore Literature Prize offered by the National Book Development Council of Singapore.

Edmund is candid about his difficulties. He worries constantly over cash flow and funding has been denied multiple times. His age — he is 65 years old — makes it difficult to secure bank loans and national grants. Despite these herculean stumbling blocks, Edmund manages to make light of his situation. “My wife says I’m a reckless man. I don’t know where the money will come from, but I know it’s important for us to keep at this.”

At the time of our interview with Edmund, we’d already spoken to several other small business owners, many with their own battle scars. Yet there is something striking about Edmund’s plight: here is a man serving the nation in a monumental manner but caught in an endlessly thankless position. We ask him for his take on service excellence and Edmund pauses. “We’re not a new industry. We’re not cutting-edge. We’re not high-tech. Book publishing has been around for donkey years but it hasn’t been properly done in Singapore. I just want to do it well!”



You left The Straits Times to open your own design studio and then eventually to Epigram Books. How did that happen?

I was Design Editor when I left The Straits Times. I didn’t think I could move any higher so it was time for a new career.

Why must somebody stick to one career anyway? People do, of course, but for me, 20 years is long enough. So I left The Straits Times to start Epigram Design when I was 40 years old. At 57, I won the President’s Design Award and felt like I had reached the top of that profession.

Coincidentally, we had already started trade publishing then and had just published “The Diary of Amos Lee”. It was quite successful but everything, from the cost of printing to editing and designing, was borne by Epigram Design. We set up a



separate company, Epigram Books, to get a more accurate picture of whether book publishing was viable as a business.

And is it?

We know now it’s not very viable. We’ve done it for about six years and it’s very tough. We’re losing money. We survive practically from month to month. I still sell books at bazaars, you know? I’m the boss but I work on weekends: selling and carrying books all the time.



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So why do you keep at it?

Because it’s important that we have books — how can we be a nation where we don’t read stories about ourselves? Local art and stories are intrinsic to the soul of a nation; it’s part of the ways in which a nation can bond. Can you imagine if all we watch in Singapore are Hollywood movies, and all the art we see is just western art? People want to read their own stories and Singapore’s the only exception where the best-selling book is a foreign book. Why am I doing this? I don’t know. I love books, I love my country, and I think things are not being done properly.

As a publisher, you primarily serve two groups of people: the readers and the writers.

The whole thing about publishing is that the publishers can never be famous. You must make your authors famous. You must make the books famous. You must brand the authors, not yourself. Like J.K. Rowling — do we know who publishes her books? We know Harry Potter, the characters, and the author, but not the publisher.

I believe good service is about making your customers feel special. So the way we do it is to make a book feel special by looking special. We want readers to look at a book and know the publisher has not taken them for granted. They know we’ve made an effort to make the book look good.

There is also an element of service in how we make sure a book is done properly. It’s hard to make money in publishing so most people cut corners by not having editors, using cheap paper stock, and not investing in design. I understand why others are doing what they’re doing — they need to survive. But, if I were to do all those things, I won’t be doing justice to the writers and the stories being told. The industry standard would remain the same.

So we don’t cut corners. We have full-time editors and designers working for us, and we even have our own marketing team. We publish stories that we think are relevant to people’s lives in Singapore; books with insights to what’s going on here. We try our best to work with authors to make their manuscript better. It’s a process. We serve the writers in a way that is beneficial to them.

Is that why you doubled the Epigram Books Fiction Prize value? Because you see Epigram Books serving local writers and the industry here?

It’s very simple. The biggest prize in Singapore for writing a novel is the Singapore Literature Prize: \$10,000. It’s awarded every two years so, basically, the winners get \$5,000 a year. What is \$5,000? You can’t even live on it, you know, and yet the Government wants to promote literature.

I got so fed up I decided I would create my own prize. Doubling the prize money came about because after the first year, we got feedback from people that it wasn’t fair and that the other finalists should get something. Before we started, few novels were being published. Now, because we’ve started the prize, we’ve published about 15 titles in two years. People are writing. People want to write about their country. People want to write Singapore stories.

I am not a hero, and I’m not doing it for the money. I think we’re doing something very important for the country, which is, unfortunately, at great expense to my own financial health. ♦

CREATING MEANING IN WORK

✦ *Eunyce Yap and Joanna Lam, Founders of fashion label, Love & Bravery, tell us why there should always be more to business than just the bottom line.*

Eunyce Yap and Joanna Lam, Founders of local label, Love & Bravery, made headlines for hitting the million dollar turnover mark before they turned 30 years old. The two have valuable synergies: Eunyce is a risk-taker and go-getter, Joanna tells us, while Joanna herself is a strategic planner. One is process-oriented; the other, design-focused. When we ask if they ever disagree, Joanna replies with a resounding, “of course!” while Eunyce chimes in: “All the time!”

The two are far too grounded to ever proclaim themselves progressive, but there is a clear pattern to their ambition. They first ventured into the e-commerce space back when it was still an unfamiliar concept locally. They later embraced automation at a time when other blogshop owners were sceptical of the heavy investment, and despite knowing their customers would be wary of change. This year, they're about to embark on their first community project — a vocational tie-up with a school that works with young adults with special needs.

When asked if this is their way of paying it forward, Joanna simply replies, “We just want to make it meaningful as we grow.”

Let's talk about how Love & Bravery got started. Love & Bravery began as a side business in university?

Eunyce (E): Yeah, I had friends who were teaching tuition to earn pocket money but I started an online store, which was a relatively new concept then. We started on a blog where we would upload photos of clothes and Joanna was my model.

You've come a long way since.

Joanna (J): We now manage a team of around 30 staff, including part-timers. There are 10 of us at the HQ.

E: You know, when we first started adding people to the team, I had a real fear that they would want to leave. As a boss, you have to manage people. You have to care about how they feel and whether they have career growth. It's not about managing the work anymore. Joanna is more nurturing than I am so she spends more time talking to the team and making the effort to explain certain processes to them.

J: It was a bit difficult when we first started hiring because things we had been doing on our own automatically



had to suddenly be broken down into steps. We also had to ensure these steps would be routine. Our brand of service is more towards the corporate side because we have a lot of employees.

E: It's necessary to have standard operating procedures in customer service because customers receive inconsistent service without them. And that affects customer expectations.

So you have a training process in place?

J: Yes. Everyone who comes in goes through rotation within the different departments. Rotation is about one to two weeks.

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We have rules and policies that are shaped by our experience from running the business, but we always let our team know they should speak to us if they feel there's something that should be changed.
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It doesn't matter which department you're from; the entire process is interlinked. Even if you're part of the creative team working on photos and eDMs, you need to know what the packing team is doing. There's a process behind everything, whether it's backend or frontend. Nobody is isolated.

We started training because we knew we had to be specific about things. It was a bit messy at first but the more we hire, the easier it gets, in a way. There are other challenges, of course, because the more we hire, the more we work with different people. And all of us have different temperaments, needs, and ways of working.

E: We try to push our staff to realise their potential, in that we don't always step in when the going gets tough. We sometimes leave them to sink a little. We try not to meddle. But we always look out for their welfare.

How so?

E: I think being an SME allows us to create that kind of working environment. My husband was working in an advertising company that worked him hard. He worked daily from 11am to 12 midnight for about two years without overtime pay — at that time, I was struggling with a young child, and that really shaped what I thought about working overtime. When new team members join us on their first day, we always tell them what we expect. One of those expectations is for them to not stay past six because we strongly feel work and personal life should be separate.

J: Yeah, we let them know it's okay if they leave on the dot. We don't create the impression that the longer you stay the better your appraisal will be.

E: We're also quite open; if there's anything they want to talk about, we usually talk over lunch because we eat lunch together every day.



J: That's actually our number one expectation: communication from both parties. We have rules and policies that are shaped by our experience from running the business, but we always let our team know they should speak to us if they feel there's something that should be changed. We try to show them what we mean by taking the first step. Sometimes I say things like, "I don't think I'm doing this right. What do you think?"

So it's not about hierarchy?

J: Well, we've actually realised that the more we hire, the more hierarchy has become necessary because we want each person to have career growth within the company. Some people are afraid to join smaller companies because they're afraid they can't grow. We don't want our employees to feel like they'll be stuck either.

And how do you want to grow the business then?

J: When you talk about business expansion, some people want to move into a big office or open two stores within a year, but we

want to make it meaningful as we grow. Sometimes we get a bit *sian* (jaded) working the day-to-day, so it's important to find joy in work. We're starting to focus on meaningful projects that we can do for the community.

I wouldn't say we're super famous, but we have significant branding within the local scene and four retail stores. What we hope to do is to work with special needs students and raise awareness among our customers to let them know that these kids can work just as well, if not better, than us.

E: She's been speaking to me for a while about this project and I was initially a bit apprehensive because portraying the right image is so important to a fashion brand. But I now find the project very meaningful and see how the company can create impact in our society.

J: I think as an employer you have more options, in a way, to balance the needs of the business with finding satisfaction in your work. It's not just about earning money to make you happier. It's about having heart. ✦



PAYING IT FORWARD



Joshua Sim, founder of The Beautiful Moment Photography, defines service excellence in a surprisingly relatable way — through emotional intelligence.





There is an openness to Joshua Sim that one doesn't usually encounter with creative entrepreneurs. Within minutes of our chat, he has started telling us about pricing within the industry. By the end, he has regaled stories of working partnerships and unusual customer requests.

As a corporate crossover with no prior professional experience in photography, Joshua first used his contacts to gain a foothold in the industry. Five years on and a leading wedding photographer, Joshua continues to remember his humble roots. The same drive that compels him to go above board for his customers pushes Joshua to pay it forward to an incoming generation of younger, aspiring photographers.

You were working in the corporate field before you started your own business. What made you pursue photography as a career?

I think I was at a turning point in my life then — I was about to get married, and photography had always been something I loved doing. But it took me a year to gather enough courage because I knew my salary would be slashed by more than 80 percent and I didn't have a portfolio to use. I discussed this with my girlfriend — now wife — on whether I should go for it, and she said, "why not?" So I gave myself a year to see if I could make it. In that year, I shot for events, food, kids' parties — basically any job that I could get just so I could build a portfolio.

Were you trained or self-taught?

Self-taught. I believe technical skills can be gained with practice, so I attended a few workshops where I met other photographers

and learnt soft skills instead. I really recommend attending relevant workshops because they're taught by people who have distilled their years of experience into tips you can immediately implement in your business. They taught me how small things that we do as photographers can help couples better engage with each other during a shoot.

Would you say soft skills are more important than technical skills then?

I wouldn't say it's more important, but I think most people would be able to pick up the technical side of things quite easily if they went for classes and practised every day. The soft skills are more useful for pre-wedding photography. Bridal studios typically tell couples to pose and stay still. There isn't much interaction or movement. The way that I shoot pre-weddings is to get the couple to engage with each other by asking them questions. I find that if you get

couples to focus on each other rather than the camera in front of them, you get more genuine images. Which is why soft skills are important — you need to be able to draw out who they really are in the shoot. Not having soft skills will affect the images you deliver.

Personally, I think people who don't make it often lack either good branding or emotional intelligence (EQ). In order to be successful you have to be your worst critic. You have to watch the way you conduct yourself. Some people can be super talented but not the best in terms of EQ. I know some wedding planners appreciate it when photographers conduct themselves in a certain manner. Word-of-mouth recommendations are very powerful, and if people stop recommending you, everything's going to go downhill.



Is that what service excellence means to you — having good EQ?

I think service excellence is also about being strict with yourself and your work. It's about always going above board. It starts from the first meeting till you deliver the images; you have to be consistent in how you deal with clients. On the actual wedding day, reassure couples that everything is going to be fine. You're going to be with them the entire day, so bring a certain level of energy when you meet them in the morning.

Another thing I learnt early on is to be more observant — keep an eye out for any extra objects, like dustbins or lampposts, that may be intruding a photograph. Put in more thought into every image you're returning to your client. I think it's important to deliver images which you've spent time looking at and working on.

Sometimes I surprise my clients with extra things, like a canvas print or 4R prints. There are also other situations where I don't charge clients extra even though they've exceeded the set hours, or I deliver their images earlier than expected.

I recently worked with a bride who told me not to take pictures of her mum — it was an unusual request, but as a service provider, I think the first response should always be "Ok, I'll see what I can do." If it's doable, just do it. It's really not too much to ask for.

People often say that the best job is your hobby because you're making a living out of it, but I feel like you have to treat it as a proper job because that's the only way you can continually make sure you're doing your best for your clients. The fact that I use the term 'job' means that there will be days where some weddings are totally uninspiring. On days like that I'll go oh man, I have to wake up and go for yet another wedding. But those are the days where you have to remind yourself that you're committed to the client, and you need to push through and do the best for them.

Do you think a person can learn to have EQ?

Yeah, I think you can learn it, but it definitely takes practice. Confidence is important. When you first start your business, the first few customer interactions that you have can sometimes be a little bit awkward because you don't really know how to sell what you are. That makes it more difficult for customers to decide to go with you when they pick up that you're unsure about your business proposition.

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I really recommend attending relevant workshops because they're taught by people who have distilled their years of experience into tips you can immediately implement in your business.
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That's why I think mentorship is important. When my associate photographer first tagged along with me on shoots, I made sure to observe the way he dealt with people. I also brought him to meetings with clients, and after a few meetings I let him do the pitch by himself while I sat in. I would only butt in when he went off tangent. He eventually had enough confidence to deal with situations and meet clients on his own.

People shouldn't be afraid to reach out to business owners that are in line with the sort of business they see themselves wanting to start in future because most small business owners tend to be quite open to sharing. I'm more than willing to bring any beginner photographers to my shoots because there's absolutely no loss and that's how I started too. The photographers don't get paid but they get to keep whatever they shoot and experience what it's like to be a wedding photographer. It's my way of giving back. ✦

IT TAKES TWO



◆ Faye Sit and Ernest Ting of Hook Coffee contemplate Singapore's service standards and if the Singapore market is ready for better service.

Does Singapore lack good service? We've just asked co-founders Faye Sit and Ernest Ting of Hook Coffee to weigh in on the matter, and from their laughter it's clear the two have discussed this before. "It's a chicken and egg issue," Faye says, while Ernest chimes in. "It takes two hands to clap."

It's an interesting take on a hotly debated question. It's also a rarely articulated perspective: many of us think of service within the confines of service delivery, but Faye and Ernest have broadened the discussion to raise issues like customer reception and responsibility.

Shaped by their personal experience of receiving excellent customer service while living overseas, Faye and Ernest were determined to build their coffee subscription business beyond mere product; excellent service was also a founding business belief. But while their service philosophy opened

doors, it also quickly found a group of customers that forced the company to tighten its generous policies. We speak to them about their lessons.

You guys started Hook Coffee after returning from London. Why the idea?

Ernest (E): I studied in the UK and gained an interest in specialty coffee. I wanted to strike out on my own after I graduated and do something I was passionate about. There were a lot of subscription companies in the UK at that time but no coffee subscription in Singapore, so I roped Faye in.

Faye (F): I actually told Ernest I would only join him if we focused on sustainable coffees. I think offering a product with traceability is a big part of customer service. People want to know where the goods they're consuming come from.

We also used a few subscription services in the UK and thought they provided really good service. If there was something about my order I didn't like, I knew I could contact them and they would get back to me really quickly and politely. We thought that was lacking in Singapore: we found that if you try to call someone on the phone here, it's first hard to reach them, and when you do reach them they're not very polite. So our philosophy also became about providing really good customer service.



Has that been a challenge to achieve here?

E: It is. We try to deliver great customer service, but Singapore customers can be difficult to deal with.

How so?

E: We have a no commitment policy, which drives a lot of benefit seekers. These subscribers tend to abuse the system. They're sometimes also verbally abusive.

When we were in the UK, we found that people willingly wrote reviews when they liked a product. The culture here is different: people like to write bad reviews, but very few write good reviews — even if they like the product! There has to be an incentive in order to get most of our customers to write reviews.

F: Consumers here like to see what their friends or bloggers are saying, or what's on social media, so customer service is often overlooked here.



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The culture here is different: people like to write bad reviews, but very few write good reviews — even if they like the product!
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E: This isn't that prevalent in UK or Europe where service is a priority.

F: Yeah, Singaporeans are very informed consumers when it comes to researching products before they buy. Before they go out with friends, they look for the best places to eat at. They're driven by trends and good deals.

E: They're driven by reviews.

But you also have a loyal customer base despite these challenges.

F: Yes, we have customers we've built rapport with through personal engagement. We realised there were certain customers who were ordering a lot of coffee, so we would send them personal messages to thank them for supporting us or sometimes give them surprise freebies.

As an online company, it's difficult to get face-to-face interaction, but our loyal customers come down to say hi when we pop-up around Singapore. We take photos with them; we talk to them. Sometimes we get to know new customers at pop-ups, so we remember their names and faces from day one. When they order online we make sure to send them a personal message.

We also use technology to get to know our customers better. We designed a recommendation engine on our website because specialty coffee is still quite new here and many people don't know how to choose their coffees. The engine has 95% accuracy on which coffee we think a customer will like from our range, so we know their preferences from the start. They're subsequently able to rate the coffees they receive. We use this information to send them new products we think they will enjoy.



And you also work with corporate clients. How's that like?

F: It's a whole different ball game. B2B customers are more concerned with costs, so we first have to provide an attractive price. Maintaining the relationship isn't as difficult because they're not as fickle as B2C customers. So for direct customers you have to spend more energy retaining them, but for corporate clients you have to invest in acquiring them.

E: We conduct quality control checks for B2B clients each month, but for direct customers it really comes down to their individual orders. When we first started the business it was all about acquiring customers, but the focus also expanded to retaining them.

F: Yeah, we had customers who had been with us for some time and others only for a short while. We started to see that it wasn't efficient to communicate with them in the same approach, so we developed a roadmap for working with our B2C customers through feedback forms that we incentivised customers to fill out by crediting them with points in their accounts.

The roadmap ensures customers are engaged at different junctures of their customer experience.

How do you think service here fares in comparison to other countries?

E: I think online service is better than brick-and-mortar service, partly because the online companies are younger start-ups that tend to pay more attention to service.

But brick-and-mortar service in Singapore is really bad. You go to a nice restaurant and they don't serve you well. They don't smile; they drop the plate on the table. I rarely leave a restaurant impressed by the service, but I'm often impressed in London or even around Asia. You can go to a fast food chain there and they take the time to talk to you. Faye and I always wonder whether it's a problem with the service or the customers.

How do you think we can improve?

F: Service providers can go the extra mile to make customers feel valued by showing empathy and being helpful to understand and resolve the customer's issues. They should be friendly and positive, and take customer feedback seriously by taking actions to improve. Knowing and remembering individual customers' preferences also allows them to feel special.

We hope that customers remember that those working in the service line are human too. Treating others with respect, being polite and friendly, and showing appreciation can go a long way in encouraging service providers to consistently practise quality service. ✦



GROWING TOGETHER



Shannon Ong and Mike Foo of Woods in the Books discuss the significance of diverse stories and the importance of growing with your customers.

At a time when many big-name bookstores have been forced to shutter in Singapore, Woods in the Books stands as a beacon of hope. The small, independent bookstore is frequented by a community of locals and expat customers, many who have since become regular visitors. What started as a \$20,000 experiment by Shannon Ong and Mike Foo in 2009 — both without prior industry experience — has now grown into two stores manned by a team of six.

Shannon and Mike are a humble, soft-spoken duo. They appear bewildered by questions about policies and procedures but easily relay stories of designing book appreciation programmes and memorable customers. "Just a few days ago, a regular customer dropped off her mum and son here at the store. She had to rush off so she asked if we could book them a taxi when they were done. Later the grandma told us that the boy, whom we've known since he was a tiny toddler, had just turned eight years old the

day before. The grandparents had flown in from the States to celebrate, and when they asked him where he wanted to spend his "me time" with his grandma, he chose to come here. We don't know much about the family because we are the kind of space where we leave you alone to look at books, but it was such an honourable moment. Kids give you the most honest feedback. That he would choose to spend his precious time with us and that his mum trusted us enough to assist them — that is trust that takes years to build."



You opened Woods in the Books fresh out of school with a \$20,000 loan from family and without any experience in the trade. You signed a two-year lease for the store! Weren't you scared?

Shannon (S): Not really. We thought we would just become salaried employees if we failed!

The key for us was always to keep on trying. We didn't have much when we first started. The down payment for the rental was half of our loan so our shelves were quite empty. We had to use the money from our sales to buy new books to top up our inventory. We just knew we wanted to do something together and we've always loved picture books.

What is business like now?

S: It's not brisk but people show us support by buying books from us. Their support sustains us. At some point, the shop took on a life of its own and evolved beyond us. The children who were coming to our bookshop were growing up and we could no longer satisfy their reading needs. When we saw that happening, it forced us to consider their long-term reading sustainability and how we could keep serving their growing needs. It was no longer about fulfilling our own dreams of a picture-book store but serving the community.

That's why we increased the age group we serve with Books Ahoy!, our second store. We stock other selections like reader

books, which act as a bridge between picture books and chapter books, and non-fiction books for our older customers.

Is your business threatened by online bookstores?

S: Yes, definitely, but I guess we differentiate ourselves by providing a genuine experience to everyone who walks through our doors. We are physically present for them and we try to create irreplaceable personal memories that they can't get from the virtual world.

This shop is our small, experimental space. When we moved here, we wanted to use the space to create different programmes for children. Just last year we had a



Roald Dahl party. We also co-organised the Children's Street Trail along Yong Siak Street. Mike started teaching unconventional art classes where he encouraged children to explore art instead of just creating a beautiful picture, which is what some other teachers do.

But we didn't start these events because we wanted to differentiate ourselves from online stores. It wasn't a strategy to counter the online shopping trend; it was always about engaging our community and encouraging them to read. When we first started designing our programmes, we thought about how fun activities would be for our participants or ourselves and not about the sales or social media potential of the programmes.

How would you describe your relationship with your customers? We're sure people ask for recommendations all the time.

Mike (M): We treat our customers based on how we want to be treated. And most people go to bookstores because they want to be left alone right?

S: I personally feel uncomfortable when shop assistants seem too eager to serve me. Our store is small and homely: we treat everyone like our friends and guests, so we usually leave our customers alone and quietly observe how they're doing. We want them to take their time and not feel defensive or think we're shadowing them. Our customers know we will help them if they need assistance.

Sometimes we have extreme situations where parents believe we should allow kids to do anything because we're a children's bookstore. Some foreign parents think we are too strict with the children but often it's because of a difference in culture: we prefer to take preemptive measures to prevent children from hurting themselves. And I also think it's about mutual respect: you should respect the space and the people who keep it for you.

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We try to create irreplaceable personal memories that they can't get from the virtual world.
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But don't you receive complaints of customers who interpret your manner of service as uncaring?

S: There is a very clear difference between caring and not. I think many customers feel that service staff don't care about them because shop assistants are looking at their phones when they walk into a shop. We always greet our customers and make eye contact with them when they walk in. People know we acknowledge their presence from that short interaction. And of course we take the initiative to approach customers who look lost.

We can recognise some of our returning customers, so we know if they are the loud and bubbly sort who like to be engaged, or the type of shopper who prefers to browse quietly on his or her own. Some customers come just to browse but others come in a state of emergency because they need an anniversary present or a gift for an event. We have this one customer in his 70s who always comes in asking for recommendations. One time he walked in looking for books to buy for his niece in her 20s who had just quit her job and was looking for direction in life. We recommended a few titles to him, and the next time he came back, he told me, "Oh Shannon, my niece loved the book you recommended." He isn't the kind of customer who buys 10 books at a go, but he recognises our effort in addressing his needs. He's a happy returning customer and that means a lot to us. ✦

SERENDIPITOUS STYLINGS



Multihyphenate Yi Lian Ng reflects on her seemingly radical career change and life as a florist, freelance writer and stylist, and accidental entrepreneur.



Yi Lian Ng is an award-winning, former journalist who has picked the brains of some of the world's leading fashion designers. With over a decade of experience in fashion journalism — including a stint as Fashion Editor of a leading international title and Associate Editor of the world's leading trend forecast agency — Yi Lian counts herself lucky for knowing what she wanted to do from an early age.



"As a teenager I knew I loved fashion and writing, so I didn't waste my time trying to find my footing. I started interning when I was only 17 for titles like Cleo and Harper's BAZAAR. I dreamt of being a features writer at Cleo, and at 21 years old, I was offered that job. At that time I thought, 'wow, I've gotten my dream job! What's next? Is this it?'"

It is this hunger that seems to drive Yi Lian to pursue the various creative endeavours in her life — with styling, writing,



I don't think service providers should fear customers nor categorise them as a group of annoying, demanding people.





and now, floral arrangement as a full-time job. Passionate and exuberant, Yi Lian talks at length about life's serendipity with surprising candour. She habitually prefaces answers with "maybe this is too much information..." and segues into anecdotes from her personal life. As we chat, it becomes apparent that Yi Lian's approach to business is less about her perspective on work and more about her ethos in life.

Yi Lian Ng Floral Atelier started as a side business while you were still at your day job. Why the decision to run it full-time?

Yes, it wasn't easy to make that leap. I had been running the flower business part-time for two years and started to consistently

make more with the flowers than I was with my full-time job each month.

I'm not being cynical, but I believe no one is indispensable. You're just a number to corporations. If you romanticise your role, that's your downfall. It's all about the bottom-line for corporations, and it's really difficult to be a creative person if you're not given the time to clear your mind. I burnt out, and even though I loved my job, it got to a point where I realised I wasn't getting any younger and I wanted to start saving money.

How was the transition like?

To be honest, I was depressed for the first six months after I quit. It sounds like such a first-world problem because even though

I had more time and money, I felt like I had lost a huge part of my adult identity. I felt isolated because I missed my colleagues! Creatively I felt a sense of emptiness.

A lot of people associate being busy with being useful and feeling worthy. At the magazine I was always busy thinking about things, but when that was taken away, I didn't know how to derive my self-worth.

And how has entrepreneurship been so far?

I've actually never aspired to be an entrepreneur! I've always wanted to work for what I love, and I don't value money the same way I value experiences.

It's a blessing if the money comes, but the most important thing to me is customer satisfaction. I'm ambitious and I want to fulfill my customers' requests all the time. Unlike many florists, I continue to take personalised orders even during busy periods. It's incredibly stressful because sometimes I only have 10 minutes to customise a bouquet!

But it's worth it when I hear how my flowers are involved in my customers' personal lives. I've done the flowers of couples from their first date to their engagement to their wedding day. I get so involved with customers that I know what she likes; I know their dates; I know where to deliver the flowers even without an address when he texts me. It feels good to know I am so trusted.

One of my favourite parts of the job is having my flowers used in a proposal. I know they're just flowers, but the fact someone has chosen me and my flowers to be a part of something so important... they can't pay you enough money to get that satisfaction of being a part of someone's life.

You work with corporate clients too, right? Is there a difference in the working relationships?

It's not much different. At the end of the day, you're still working with people whether it's in a corporate or non-corporate relationship, and their needs are the same. They want to feel that their needs are being taken care of, so I provide that service for them.

How would you describe your brand of service then?

I'm more personal and engaged. Besides emails or orders through the e-shop, many customers just call or text me to place an order. My e-shop's order forms don't come with a long list of terms and conditions and honestly, as a consumer, I never read those words anyway. I basically shape my brand of service delivery as how I would like to receive it as a consumer.

But how do you deal with challenging clients? Do you have a service recovery procedure?

The thing is, I don't avoid complaints from customers — if they have the right attitude, I actually really appreciate the feedback because I want to be able to learn where my mistakes and flaws are and grow from them.

I believe in managing customer expectations when it comes to creative products like floral arrangements. Depending on the nature of the complaint and the customer's attitude, I sometimes provide a discount code or even send them a brand new arrangement. If they complain about the immediate state of the flowers when they are delivered, then sure, I'll look into that. But I don't entertain complaints about aesthetic opinions or the nature of some flowers which have short lifespans. I can't be compensating for people's lack of education or differing sense of aesthetics.

I don't think service providers should fear customers nor categorise them as a group of annoying, demanding people. Just approach them as you would like to be approached. Remember they are just fellow human beings like you who have needs to be taken care of. Engage in small talk but also provide some personal space. Good service is really just kindness taken to a service-providing context. It costs nothing and is a way of paying it forward.

That's a great perspective.

I think there's an increasing number of people who enjoy helping smaller businesses grow because they see personal touches and experience more interpersonal relationships with smaller businesses. I enjoy that as a consumer too. A lot of heart, time, and effort is put into small businesses and I love the idea that something I purchase from a small business has every bit of the business owner's passion and soul in it. ✦



HOW TO DESIGN FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS



Selma Bamadhaj and Nur Rulhuda of Lully Selb school us in the importance of personalised service and turning customers into friends.

The global Muslim fashion market is estimated to be worth \$327 billion by 2020, but here in Singapore, modest fashion is still in its infancy. Selma Bamadhaj and Nur Rulhuda, co-founders of Muslimah label, Lully Selb, are spearheading the movement, catering to both Muslims and Non-Muslims looking for edgy, modest clothing.

“We feel that our clothing line can create a conversation between Muslims and Non-Muslims by raising awareness of the different modest wear styles. You don’t have to wear a long, covered dress or a tudung like how a typical makcik dresses. Lully Selb has become our personal mission to spread this message.”

Despite their grand ambitions, the conversation we’re having keeps circling back to one thing — their customers. Small business owners tend to be closer to their customers, but Selma and Huda speak of their customers with a certain intimacy: they are friends who share a similar taste in fashion; they are also friends who share the occasional dinner table. Whether consciously or not, the enterprising duo has built their business on an age-old secret: listening to their customers and actually acting on their advice.

What’s the story of Lully Selb?

Selma (S): We wanted to create a brand that could be appreciated by both the mainstream and modest wear market. For example, you (as a Chinese) wouldn’t wear something from the modest wear market because it looks like a *baju kurung*. We wanted to change that.

Rulhuda (R): We prefer urban, edgy styles — we noticed the commercial market had nice clothing but they were often too translucent. It was difficult for us to wear without layering but that’s not always practical with the weather.

Is it challenging conveying what Lully Selb is about?

S: It is. When we began, our brand was so new to the market. People would say, “wow, how do I wear this?” because they still had this mindset that headscarves had to be simple, boring, and traditional.

R: Another challenge was that some of our prints were too loud and not everyone liked them. We had to fine-tune our designs and find a balance using softer colours and subdued prints.

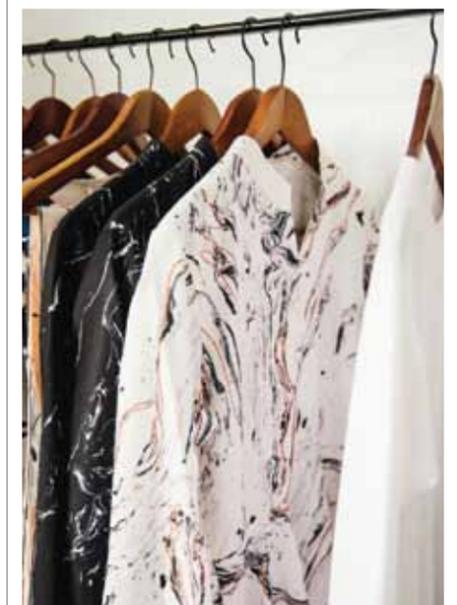
S: Huda is an artist and I wear the commercial hat, so there are times when our perspectives clash. The business definitely respects her creative direction, but we also know we have to find middle ground.



So as an online retailer, what are your thoughts on service in the online fashion industry here?

S: The online industry is about automation, like how you receive a thank you email once you make a purchase online, or get an immediate notification once your purchase has been shipped. And automated features can be quite smart; they can customise emails with “Dear (customer name)”. Honestly, though, we both think that customers are so used to seeing these types of emails it’s become necessary to do more than just rely on automation.

For me, service is about being personal to your customers. Even though we send out standard mailers, we still write personalised emails to some of our customers. Sometimes we even write personalised, handwritten notes. A lot of our VIP customers have become our friends, actually. They have our personal numbers and know our personal social media accounts, and they give feedback all the time. They’re loyal and supportive. There is trust between us. So to me, that’s what service should be about — maintaining close, personal relationships with your customers.



So we refine Huda’s artistic concepts based on customer feedback or current trends for commercial purposes.

How did you gather this feedback?

R: We had many trial-and-error moments, so we decided to get feedback from our customers on what they really wanted by organising focus groups.

S: We handpicked the people: most were our core customers and some were

influencers. We also selected customers who had bought from us many months before but were quiet after.

The sessions were mostly about determining the winning prints. We shared the products we were planning to release to see how customers reacted. We got to know their tastes and preferences better by showing them different colour palettes and silhouettes. We used the information to refine the prints before production.



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So to me, that's what service should be about — maintaining close, personal relationships with your customers.

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Does this extend to offline touch points too?

S: Yes. Serving our customers is a continuous and conscious effort we make every day, so while we're pretty much always online, we feel being offline is just as important. It's where we meet new customers and how existing customers get to actually see and feel the products, talk to us, and learn more about our brand story.

R: It's important to be present every time we have a pop-up store event, because many new customers come down just to meet us. We sometimes host workshops where customers can come behind-the-scenes to see our process. We also host dinner sessions for our VIPs whenever we launch a new collection. The dinners are a time for us to catch up on our lives and get to know each other better.

It's just you two running the business now, so how do you think your service philosophy will change when you grow?

S: Expanding the business is important, but existing customers also come first. Our core customers will always be our priority, especially at events. I feel like one of the points many businesses fumble at is when they start to grow and lose their identity. We know there are customers who go "Oh I used to support that business but they're now so big and they've changed."

We will probably be adding to the team soon and we want whoever joins us to first believe in the brand and our approach. What we're looking for is someone with that personal touch. Training will come hand in hand, but it's less about skills and more about who they are as a person.

With this framework of service as a very personal, tailored approach, do you think there are areas our local service industry can work on?

R: First impressions matter. If the staff doesn't acknowledge me when I first enter a shop, I immediately don't feel like the service is good. But I usually stay for a long time if they show they are ready to serve.

S: I feel like once you've travelled abroad, you realise how our local service standards still have a long way to go. I most enjoy walking into a store when the owner's there. I think people are more passionate about service when the store is their own baby. And I think the service in the beauty and wellness industry here is generally good.

But for the most part, I think customer service isn't in our nature or culture. We aren't the most polite or passionate people in the world. Everything's rushed and everyone's stressed out — sometimes the waiter at the restaurant doesn't even smile at you. And at the end of the day, I feel like all it takes is a smile to show customers you're there for them. ✦

