

EXCELLENCE EXPLORED

10 LOCAL
ENTREPRENEURS
SHARE THE
STORIES
BEHIND THEIR
QUEST FOR
EXCELLENCE.



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FEATURING

Anthony the Spice Maker | Bus Uncle | Doctor Anywhere | Hai Sia Seafood | Lloyd's Inn
Perk by Kate | The Projector | The Soup Spoon | Triceratops | Unpackt

Foreword

I am delighted to present the third issue of Excellence Explored, where we unveil stories behind gutsy individuals' experimental and creative approaches to pioneering novel solutions for today's consumers.

The Singapore business scene is challenged by a landscape where technology has become a double-edged sword, and where competing interests are presented in the face of rapid innovation. Given these developments, tried and tested business models are no longer guarantees of success.

In this issue, we speak with 10 business owners representing various sectors to discover the secret ingredients behind their success stories, as well as their unconventional philosophies which differentiates them from other businesses operating in the same space.

Abhilash Murthy of Bus Uncle shares the importance of leveraging technology to develop novel solutions, while Anna Lim of The Soup Spoon examines the impact of customer and staff engagement on the company's vision of service delivery. Lim Wai Mun of Doctor Anywhere discusses the hurdles to cross when launching a radical product, while Ang Junting of Hai Sia Seafood examines how new markets can be identified.

We hope these conversations serve to inspire you, even as you continue to strive for excellence in your respective endeavours.



Ms Neeta Lachmandas

Executive Director

Institute of Service Excellence
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Welcome to *Excellence Explored*

Hear from enterprising business owners and entrepreneurs who have broken out of the mold and chosen the road less travelled.

Follow these individuals' journeys from conception of a dream, to eventual realisation of their vision.

Be inspired by their passion and perseverance.

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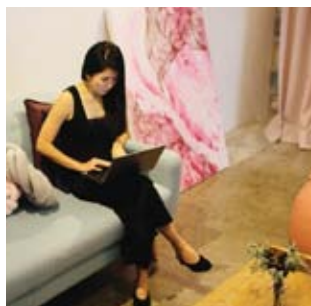
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Handmade with *Love*

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



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

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

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



Anna, why the focus on soups?

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

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

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

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

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

Do you consider product range important in your service approach?

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

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

How else have you designed your dining experience?

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

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

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

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

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





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

Is there a formal training process?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Service for *Millennials*

Joan Chang of Lloyd's Inn relates the importance of branding for a younger audience and the changing landscape of service in boutique hospitality.



Tucked away in the outskirts of Somerset lies Lloyd's Inn, a 34-room boutique hotel that's almost always fully booked. With its grey and white palette, warm wooden accents, light-filled rooms, and tropical outdoor showers, it's hard to imagine Lloyd's Inn was once a neglected budget hotel established in 1990.

The Lloyd's Inn of today was revived by Joan Chang and her team of architects and hospitality professionals in 2014. Bolstered by the immense success of their Singapore location, Lloyd's Inn has since opened in Bali in late 2018, and is set to open in Kuala Lumpur in 2019. Joan also recently opened Cara Cara Inn in Bali, a new hospitality concept straddling the conventional hostel-hotel divide. Terming it a 'hostel-tel', Cara

Cara Inn, much like Lloyd's Inn, speaks of Joan's ambition for shaking up the industry.

Although she entered the industry at only 24, Joan has leveraged her youth by cleverly identifying the gaps in regional markets to build accommodations for millennial travellers: affordable, centrally located places with strong ties to local culture, interiors that remain perennially Instagrammable — the number one source for millennial travel inspiration — and services streamlined to suit younger, more independent needs.

Welcome to the new age of boutique hospitality.



Joan, Lloyd's Inn has a very strong social media presence. Can you tell us how you built it?

I am a strong advocate of social media and it has worked well for us because we were one of the first few boutique hotels in Singapore to pioneer experiential marketing back when social media marketing was still relatively new. Experiential marketing is about conveying how your brand is experienced on social media — from the caption to visuals.

I feel like [social media] is very personal, so I continue to handle it even though I have an assistant now. I continue to see every tag of us — everyone who uploads photos, tags us, hashtags us, location tags us — which helps me stay in touch with the brand on the ground.

Manpower is a challenge, so even though we've diversified the brand, I've kept social media to one account. That way I'm less busy but also able to exercise more quality control over what's posted.

Lloyd's Inn has a few surprising differences. For example, there's no in-house F&B; instead you provide complimentary breakfast at Kiliney Kopitiam or a subsidised breakfast at Freshly Baked.

Space was a constraint for us, and in a small compound, we felt the presence of F&B might instead be a disturbance to guests. Business-wise, we would also need to consider how to manage the noise, the overheads, the manpower, so we decided to keep it clean and focus on our hospitality.

We are in a location that offers great shopping and cafes at your doorstep, and if you look at traveller demographics and profiling, most people want to go out to try other kinds of food. We offer outsourced breakfast vouchers with the nearby Singaporean cafes because we see this as an added advantage — guests can come here and experience local culture on their own time.



You guys are also big on promoting local brands within the hotel — you offer a robe designed by homegrown fashion brand, Ying The Label, for instance.

We want to support other local brands because we are also a local brand. At the end of the day, the travel industry is now moving into a different era where the younger generation is more savvy. When we travel, we like to search for local experiences on TripAdvisor, unlike the older generation who is interested in tours and sightseeing. I think there is a huge growth market here, so we see our promotion of local brands and experiences as a value-add to guests.

Is this idea of ‘value-adding’ how you define service excellence at Lloyd’s Inn, or even at Cara Cara Inn?

I think service excellence is a point in the service experience that people feel exceeds their expectations of the price or positioning they paid for. I think this point is always relative to each brand.

For example, Cara Cara Inn in Bali is a combination of a hostel and hotel. Bali is saturated with hotels and hostels, so I think Cara

Cara fits into that gap between the concepts because all rooms come with an ensuite bathroom, which is rare for hostels. At the same time, our average price per night is about \$30, so while we can't afford to have the extra manpower to do things like remembering our guests' names, we focus on providing service excellence by enabling our guests to be self-sufficient and move more efficiently. We educate them on how to serve themselves: we have a self-service system where people collect their own breakfasts and return the trays, and instead of a concierge, we answer questions on our website and put up recommended places to visit on Instagram.

So, service excellence really is dependent on the brand and its respective positioning, and identifying where the line is that you can value-add before you start comprising on your manpower and profits. Because Lloyd's Inn is a smaller boutique hotel, we can afford to go the extra mile and have staff attending to our guests' requests on check-in. There's less emphasis on creating self-service systems and more on training our staff to adhere to standard operating procedures (SOPs). But because we don't enjoy economies of scale, it's difficult for us to pursue things like digital solutions.





Manpower is quite expensive in Singapore, so it can be costly for us to pursue service excellence especially when service excellence requires more guest relations officers to attend to the needs of people. What we do is to actively take on our customers' feedback on how we can improve, and implement it into our SOPs if feasible. For example, when we received feedback that some rooms are humid, we solved the problem by getting dehumidifiers. If guests cite that they are unwell, we note down their concerns and try to go that extra mile by getting them medicine.

Lloyd's Inn is also a popular staycation venue, right? Have you noticed a difference between the expectations of Singaporean and international guests?

Yes, different cultures expect different things. Some cultures, especially those from the West, are more easy-going and fine with self-service concepts. I think

Asian cultures generally expect a little more people-led service, in that they need somebody to serve them. But of course we see differences in expectations within cultures as well.

How do you think you will continue to innovate and remain competitive?

I think to innovate you must adapt so you can always stay in the game. The hospitality ballgame and what is relevant will change in 5-10 years. Although we can't be sure of what will change exactly, it's our job to engage on the ground to stay in touch. 📞

"...we focus on providing service excellence by enabling our guests to be self-sufficient and move more efficiently."



Creating *Conversations*

Sharon Tan of The Projector speaks about the privilege of amplifying community voices through diverse programming.



The Projector has a knack for doing things differently. They have unorthodox beginnings: in 2014, the independent cinema was brought to life through a crowdfunding campaign which raised \$75,000. More than just offering an alternative filmgoing experience, The Projector is a unique arts and events space, providing an ideal venue for pop-ups, exhibitions, and films that prompt reflection and conversation.

Says Sharon Tan, Co-Founder of The Projector, "When we set out to start this cinema, it wasn't just about the films. It was more about creating a platform that allows different voices to be heard by a greater audience, which is sometimes quite difficult to have in Singapore. So I wouldn't go so far as to say we give a voice to these people, but I believe that if the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) has rated [a film] for public exhibition, then we should help give these films an audience. Sometimes it's hard to be a brave venue, but we made the decision to not be afraid when we started this."



Sharon, what's the story behind *The Projector*?

A lot of people think we started *The Projector* because we're cinephiles — and that's partly true because I like watching films — but the real reason was because we came to see the building and fell in love with the space. We wanted to make this place relevant again so we had to give people a good reason to come back. Since this place was already a cinema, we thought, why not open it as a cinema again?

The filmgoing experience at *The Projector* is billed as an alternative to the big boys.?

The irony of going to the movies in Singapore is that we do it as a social thing and yet we don't really talk to each other because there's no opportunity to do so. It's an individual consumption exercise — you buy popcorn, sit down, and watch the film. You might be responding emotionally during the film but right after you have to exit the theatre through some corridor in the mall. It's a terrible filmgoing experience.

I think the whole point of having a cinema like ours — along with the cafe, bar and foyer — is so people can have conversations before and after. It's not just

about the films. We wanted to create a cultural platform for people to see different things happening — meet different people, talk to different people, have different things presented to them.

How do you foster these conversations?

We've tried to design *The Projector* as an exploratory discovery — it's about coincidentally bumping into things. For example, we try to bring in different people and slip in messages that others might find interesting as opposed to being boring and preachy about issues. We have posters up about different issues. We host exhibitions and events. And when you come out of the theatre and see something interesting, you might not know how to react, but you'll still go take a look. If you're with friends, you can talk about what you've seen.

The audiences that come to our cinema also like post-show question and answer sessions (Q&As). They feel there is value in having someone talk about the movie and they also want to share their thoughts. And we definitely try to nurture the questioning, critical viewers, so we regularly organise these sessions.





And you guys run all these activities with a really small team.

Yes, the core team that does film acquisitions, programming, marketing, admin, logistics, and box office operations is made up of four full-timers including me. In our cinema operations team, I also have three projectionists and two cleaners.

Everyone — including our projectionists and cleaners — is involved in customer service because accountability and feedback are really important to us. A lot of people are surprised that the programming team works at the box office because when you talk to other cinema chains, the ones doing film acquisition are not the ones selling the tickets. But it's so important that the people marketing and doing film acquisition are the ones selling tickets because then there is direct contact with customers and we're able to keep our finger on the pulse of things.

Sometimes customer service can be quite tedious, especially when we're dealing with angry people. But I think the team recognises how important it is — nobody has ever said they don't want to do it anymore — because it keeps us directly accountable to our audience. For example, if we weren't working at the box office, our approach to creating operational policies would be very different, but because we have to think about the potentially angry customers standing right in front of us, our SOPs are all about letting the team pick their battles while not losing the personal touch.

Can you share more about accountability and customer management?

Of course! The thing about being personally accountable to your customers is that you put them in a position to be accommodating and forgiving. I think that's very powerful.

Take our very first screening of *Moonlight*, for example. In our history of film screening, this one sold out the fastest — within 45 minutes — because we had somehow gotten the director, Barry Jenkins, to do a Q&A with us via Skype after the film. It turned out to be a fiasco on the evening because no one could reach him! We even called his agent, who called his mum, but nobody knew where he was.

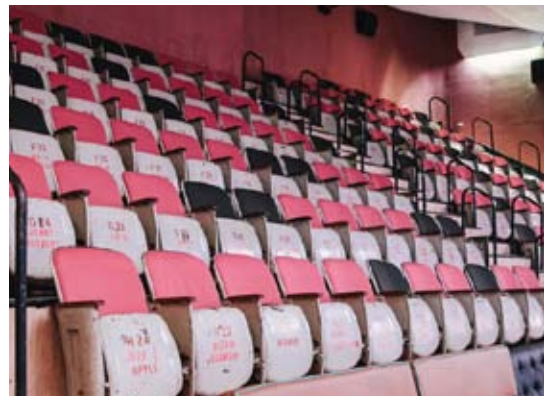
So we had to manage the audience who had bought tickets — priced a little more expensive too — as they were sitting around wondering how long more it would take. And we somehow managed to turn it into this thing where we were all looking at the screen going, "Yeah, Barry! Come on! Pick up the call!" We tried for half an hour and apologised to everyone at the end of it, but we still felt really bad so we gave out free movie vouchers. The audience knew we had tried our best but there were things we couldn't control and they forgave us for it. Some even emailed to thank us for how we handled the situation.



So how would you sum up your service vision?

It's about being a good human being through the way we treat each other and listening to what someone else has to say. It's not even about tolerance — I don't like that word — but appreciating that everyone is going to be different and have a different opinion.

Our team truly believes in the medium of film and how powerful it can be in a very subtle way. You might not be able to listen to your mum talk about her day in the office for 10 minutes, for example, but when you watch a film, you can dedicate two hours to something unrelated to you. Because at the end of the day, humans love hearing stories and looking for connections. It sounds lofty, but I feel that if we all talked and listened more to each other, the world would be a better place. I hope our space helps support those conversations. 🎬



“...we wanted to create a cultural platform for people to see different things happening.”

Scaling for the Masses



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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





What's your service philosophy?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



"...the most important thing is focusing on people. We consciously take care of...our team, our suppliers, and our customers."

Practising *Empathy*



Kate Low of Perk by Kate talks about how prioritising customer relationships has kept her at the forefront of Singapore's lingerie scene.



Back when the only places to shop for lingerie in Singapore were Triumph, La Senza, and typical department stores, Kate Low decided to buck the trend by starting the store she never had: Perk by Kate. Today, the online lingerie store specialises in padded bralettes — a model combining modesty and comfort — but Kate confesses she had no idea if her signature style would ever take off. “I wasn’t quite sure if the product would work, but I didn’t want to design something super mainstream either. When it first launched, it was a bit alien to customers so I started sending out free pieces for customers to try. That was the turning point: after that week of sending out the free pieces, our customers all came back and we sold out our first batch.”

With a background in digital marketing for a leading luxury retail group, Kate is bold, ambitious, and strategic. But she is also humble and hardworking, recognising that the strength of every business lies in its customers. In Perk’s formative years, Kate — then still working full-time — would travel to potential customers’ homes for fitting sessions after work or over weekends. While the brand has since grown to occupy a 1,900 sq. ft. studio, Kate’s vision for Perk remains the same: “We just want our customers to feel good — that’s how our name came about. Surprising customers and perking up someone’s day is the guiding principle of what we do. And when you want to make someone’s day, it means you have to give back, be empathetic, and solution-focused.”



Kate, what's your story?

Perk by Kate began as a typical story of someone sick of corporate culture and wanting to do something more meaningful. But on hindsight, it worked out really well! If I didn't bring in those brands, I wouldn't have discovered bralettes and developed my signature style now: the padded bralette.

I chose lingerie because I love it — I've always bought more lingerie than clothes.

Six years ago, there was only Triumph and La Senza; Victoria Secret wasn't even in town, and everything else in department stores was just really expensive. I began by bringing in other brands as a way for me to test the market. It was a stroke of luck that Eberjey and Honeydew intimates — popular bralette brands from overseas — were willing to supply small quantities.

Can you share more about how you developed this signature?

Many of my customers told me they liked the bralettes I offered, but didn't find it practical to wear daily because they didn't offer enough coverage. That wasn't something I wanted to hear! I also noticed I was only wearing unlined bralettes when I had baggy clothes on, and knew it was the right time to develop this new product.

How have you designed your customer journey so customers are comfortable purchasing something so intimate online?

We know online shopping for intimates can be a hassle and our customers have taken a



leap of faith when they shop with us, so the way we talk to customers is always as a friend and not a business. In all of our communication, we stay away from corporate wording — for example, our refund and exchange policy begins with “if for some reason you don't love your new lingerie, don't fret, for there's always a way.” We always try to write with empathy.

We also handle customer service enquiries, returns, and exchanges every day. If customers return something because of fit issues, then we need to address these issues immediately because they will affect the business. If it's a quality issue, we also have to quickly make changes. If it's a style issue or if it the design doesn't fit, then we have to find out why so we can take those pointers and implement them in our next collection. Because going online cuts down on human interaction, we amp up the human connection element and try replicate as much of the offline retail experience as possible. Unlike clothing, subtle nuances can really affect the fit, so we ask open-ended questions for customers to more easily share their concerns.

We also introduced an alteration service to prolong the life cycle of our bralettes. Some customers buy their lingerie when they are pregnant or nursing, and the pieces become too loose for wear post-nursing. Other customers have simply worn out their pieces and aren't ready to let them go just yet, so we make alterations to restore them to their best fit. We also alter new pieces to get them to their optimal fit.

You do a lot for your customers.

I think it's important because they have been supporting me for so long and it's only right to give back. In my previous role at Club21, I learned the value of a strong customer relationship management programme and try to implement that at Perk. During Chinese New Year and Christmas for example, I always include a little something extra for my customers, especially my long-time clients.

We try to work with partners to do giveaways and events for our customers. For example, this year we did a launch event where we



invited customers to come down free-of-charge, sit in on model presentations, experience massages, and sent them off with a goodie bag. For these types of events, we take the buying pressure off because we don't sell onsite. It's a chance for us to just do something nice for the customers.

We also have an ongoing discount programme. If customers spend \$300 with us, they will receive a promo code they can use for the rest of their lives. If they spend \$1000, the discount is bumped up to 15% and they can also send a unique referral code to their friends. This code allows them to feel happier about promoting Perk.



Speaking of which, your brand is Perk by Kate. How do you intend to grow it while still retaining that signature Kate touch?

I'm actually planning to open my own retail space! The idea came about because I'm at the studio every Saturday since I get so many customers visiting every week. So I think having a retail space is a natural progression. I want my retail space to be set up like a lounge, like you're stepping into someone's home. I will serve you coffee or tea, and the dressing room will also be equipped with a buzzer so customers can easily get the help they need.

If I had wanted to focus only on numbers, I wouldn't have chosen something so intimate, but I think the era has gone for nasty terms and conditions and inflexible exchanges. I'm surprised that so many brands in Singapore are still doing that, especially since competition is so tough. I believe the service experience you provide is what sets you apart from your competitors, and I think incorporating a more intimate approach to service is something a lot of brands can do. 🍷

"...we amp up the human connection element and try to imitate as much of the offline retail experience..."



Getting *Personal*

Ho Ching Yann of Triceratops shares how being candid and sincere with customers sets her apart from the competition.



Ho Ching Yann, or Ching, as she prefers to be called, is a busy woman. “Is it okay if I do this while talking to you?”, she asks as we sit down to chat, before proceeding to quickly trim stems for a condolence display.

As the founder of Triceratops, a boutique florist studio, Ching designs all the arrangements that leave her showroom — something she has done since 1999 — which explains why she has perfected the art of multi-tasking. An essential skill, considering Triceratops doesn’t offer premade floral arrangements. Every order is tailored to the recipient’s preferences.

In an age where it has become comparatively easy to start and scale a business, Ching is adamant about keeping Triceratops lean and local. She now has a team of six to help manage the studio, but when asked if she wants to further grow the business, Ching vehemently shakes her

head: “Don’t want! I want to remain like this. Because if we grow big, I cannot jaga [supervise] every order”.

Much has changed in floristry since 1999. Instagram, in particular, has fuelled a supercharged growth in boutique florist studios — an alternative to established names and premade bouquets. These days customisable arrangements are the norm, but it is Ching’s unapologetic candour that continues to set her apart from the competition. Peppering her answers with Hokkien, Mandarin, and Singlish, Ching regales stories of long-time clients and how she has pushed them to give better bouquets with her tough love, no-nonsense approach. While she has no dreams of expansion, this approach to customer service has become her accidental way of becoming one of Singapore’s oldest and thriving boutique florists.





Ching, tell us about how you started your journey.

I graduated and worked as an electrical engineer for about nine years, but I was always interested in the arts. The day before my wedding in 1999, I saw the floral arrangements. They were so awful! So I asked if I could redo them myself. After that, my friends asked me to work on their weddings.

Flowers and nature have existed long before humans. Our arrangements are inspired by how flowers grow outside in the wild. Triceratops is about going back to a dinosaur age of flowers in nature, not flowers in one straight line.

Triceratops has quite an unusual approach to ordering. Can you tell us more?

I don't like standardised things because I believe in giving flowers based on what the recipient really likes and dislikes. Before we did our website, we used to take personalised orders on the phone by asking questions.

Now we have a personalised quiz on our website where people answer questions about the recipient's personality, favourite colours, and style. From there we design a combination to the person's liking. Sometimes people don't answer all the questions but they give us pictures of the person and say, "I don't know what colour she likes but this is how she normally dresses." From there I read the picture and understand what they like. It's never about what I like.

But I have also rejected customers! Sometimes some husbands order for their wives and don't even know what their favourite colour is. I will counsel them, "Can you do some homework? It will also benefit your married life." I am very straightforward because to me it's all about sincerity; even though it's their wives, they also need to be sincere!

I find that if I'm a bit kaypoh [nosy], the world will be a better place. I have customers who give their wives a bouquet of red roses every year. After getting to know the wife, I call her to find out if she actually likes roses and why her husband keeps giving her flowers she doesn't like. Turns out she doesn't even like red; her favourite colour is purple! So I call the husband and ask him for a chance to try something I know his wife will like. I believe in doing these extra things to make our work better.





Fun! Tell us more about how you work with your team.

Because I'm not very organised, I can't be a corporate company, so everyone here is like family. We look after each other — we buy snacks for each other and always have lunch and dinner together. Sometimes we scold each other; my oldest colleague, Esther, and I are like husband and wife because we're always fighting.

But I've never regarded myself as a boss because I'm still a coolie. Nobody else needs to come back on weekends to work because they all have their families. As for me, I know that if I can help my customers with last-minute orders, then I will try my best to help.

I want everybody here to be happy; I don't want to stress my admin or my delivery guy. I don't think the theory of "the customer is always right" applies here. Sometimes there are customers who bully us by asking us to remake orders over and over again. When they next come to us, I will apologise and decline the order by referring them to other people.

Is that how you define your service vision?

I believe in being sincere and doing things from the heart. I follow the sequence of CPF: consistency, persistence, and focus. We are consistent in our service, persistent about our quality, and focused on our work. For example, if the flowers are not fresh I always tell my clients, even if it makes an order late. Your service must be consistent that way, if not clients won't trust you. With everyday things I tell the team they have to focus on what they're doing, like giving different flowers different treatments.

It's the same with how we work with our suppliers. We maintain good rapport with them so we will have the latest, freshest products — that way, our clients also benefit. Suppliers are very important. I believe everyone likes to be cared for, so we try not to unreasonably reject things and always pay on time. After busy periods, we enjoy pizza together. Service is a two-way relationship.





That's a good point. Since your arrangements are all personalised, what do you do when people don't like what you've created? Do you have an exchange policy?

I'll just change the arrangement. We're very flexible and I've never felt it necessary to formalise my policies.

I have been doing this for almost twenty years now so to be honest, business last time was much tougher. Now with social media, it's easier for clients to trust you because they can see what you've done. These days my clients are younger and there's a real difference in attitude! The older generation is more old-fashioned but the younger ones are more open.

Ok, final question. What advice do you have for people who want to start their own business?

You need to have a lot of time and passion, and you really need to like what you do. I never hesitate to come to work at all because every day presents a different challenge. 🌱

"...I believe in being sincere and doing things from the heart."

Repackaging *Convenience*

Leow Min Ling of Anthony The Spice Maker reflects on updating her family business to preserve Singapore's traditional flavours.



Back in the day of the maritime silk roads, spices were considered luxury goods, valued in the same way we would gold and precious stones. While there remains a strict grading system in the spice world — alongside spices that have retained top dollar — most spices today have become available to the masses, used in everyday dishes and, thanks to a rising consciousness in wellness, alternative health beverages.

Anthony The Spice Maker is widely considered Singapore's pioneer specialty spice blend store. The humble outfit began as a stall in a Chinatown wet market in 2008. As demand for their spice blends grew, so did the family business — they recently opened their first standalone shop along Kreta Ayer Road.

Run by founder, Anthony Leow, and his daughter, Leow Min Ling, the business has evolved to cater to the diverse tastes of their local and international customers. Says Min Ling, "Families have their own heirloom recipes. When my dad used to help out in his family's business, he learned how different aunts and grandmas would make their curries, and from there he developed our signature blends. My father is not greedy — he only wants people to know about his curry powder. But I want to help bring Singapore cuisine to the world — I want people to know we specialise in blends for them to enjoy the traditional flavours of Singapore."



Min Ling, how did Anthony The Spice Maker come about?

My grandparents used to wash shark's fin as a livelihood in the kampong. When they had to move to an HDB flat, they couldn't wash shark's fin because of the smell. Then they heard that a wet market had vacancy for selling spices. Market stalls are allocated — a certain number for dried goods, vegetables, and spices. So my grandfather sent my grandmother and one of my uncles to Tekka Market to learn about spices from the Indians, and they came back to teach the rest of the family how to create spice blends for cooking.

My dad grew up helping out in his family's business and learned how the different races made their curry blends. He worked as a design draftsman, but as he got older, he wanted to do something he was familiar with, so he started Liao Jia Xiang (LJX), which

supplied wholesale spice blends to vendors and supermarkets. Because of the rising rental costs in supermarkets, he decided to close LJX and start small with Anthony the Spice Maker, which started as a wet market stall in 2008.

And you helped to bring the business online. Can you tell us more about that?

When I graduated, I redesigned our webstore to add more features — cooking videos and recipes for the ready-made pastes that we sell. I came up with the idea of putting everything online because I didn't just want to create an online store; I wanted to create a convenient site for our customers to find everything they need in one place. The e-store also caters to the local market because of our busy lifestyles. Our local customers find it convenient that they don't have to come down to place repeat orders.



You've mentioned 'convenience' twice now. Is offering convenience a big part of your customer experience?

Yeah, convenience is one of our main selling points. We make our product convenient for people who make excuses to not cook because all they need to do is order online from home and turn our spice blends into pastes with instructions on our website or packaging.

More importantly, though, it's about the value of our product that we provide — our quality and traditional taste that is hard to get anywhere else. If you talk about convenience alone, you might as well use the instant blends at supermarkets — you just tear them open, add water, add chicken, and you have chicken curry. But people come back to us because they want to take ownership of the food they cook using our spice blends, which contain unadulterated spices without MSG and preservatives. Quality is that added value we provide.

What about your service?

When we started this store, I told my dad that my goal for every customer who walks in is for them to

walk away with new knowledge about spices and Singapore's food. So our customer service is about taking our time with them. I don't like service that's only about transactions — where the customers come, buy, and go. I like to ask questions: do they like to cook? What do they usually cook?

When I find out about their habits or behaviour, I then know what to recommend. Some people just don't eat local food, so I know not to recommend our Singapore blends. Some people are more into eating or drinking healthy, so I talk to them about the benefits of raw spices.

I think business is not so much about making sales but building relationships with our customers. I want our customers to feel comfortable and not stress over having to buy something when they visit. I learned from my dad to be frank with our customers, for example, if he finds out someone doesn't cook, he will tell them not to waste their money on spices. Or if the customer doesn't have a blender at home, he will tell them to buy the ready-made pastes instead. And if they do have a blender, he will tell them to buy the cheaper dried premixes.





What else have you done to deepen your relationship with your customers?

We always try to help them solve their problems. Different people have different cooking skills, so sometimes they come back to the store and say, “why is this bitter?” That’s when my dad will investigate by asking how much oil they used, how long they fried the spices for etc. Our customers used to tell us, “eh you should take a video”, so we kept that in mind.

We now have labels on our products that teach them how to turn dried spices into a paste first. We also have supplementary materials like detailed cooking videos online — all they need to do is scan a QR code that brings them to the relevant page. In our videos we walk them through details like what kind of onion and oil they should use, how to caramelize the onion in the rempah, how big the fire should be.

We recently changed our packaging because we noticed that while kraft packaging may be aesthetically pleasing, it’s easily stained with water or grease when used and would look “dirty” in the fridge. Since we highly recommend customers store spices in the original pouches, we thought we should improve the packaging. We now use waterproof, aluminium spice pouches so it’s easy to clean off oil stains.

We believe in constant improvement because there’s never a perfect way of running a business or marketing it. My dad always says, if you can give 100% to other people’s businesses when you work for them, why not give 200% to your own? 🙌

“I think business is not so much about making sales but building relationships with our customers.”

Unpacking a Sustainable Concept

Florence Tay, Co-Founder of UnPackt, breaks down how community building and education can lead to a more enduring zero-waste journey.



UnPackt, a zero-waste grocery store in a sleepy residential neighbourhood, provides an alternative form of consumption to the plastic-laden shopping at conventional supermarkets. In here, products are kept in differently sized containers to keep fresh for the week, and customers bring their own containers from home to buy only what they need. The expanding range includes everything from dried food to liquid detergent alongside a selection of tools that aids the zero-waste lifestyle — stainless steel straws, collapsible containers, and even menstrual cups.

Walk into UnPackt and you might be surprised at how laidback and spacious the place feels. While the walls are lined with shelves of containers, the rest of the space is empty save for the heart of the room — a single communal table that invariably draws gatherings both big and small.

Florence Tay, Co-Founder of UnPackt, shares more with us about building an engaged community and a better future for our children by way of a welcoming space and homely service.

Florence, what led you to start UnPackt?

I came across a viral video of people bringing their own containers when they shop. I thought that was very practical because at the end of the day, we only consume the contents in the packaging and not the packaging itself. Coming from a business background, I know consumers pay for the cost of packaging, so it's not practical when we don't consume it.

I shared the video with my co-founder, Jeff, who lives alone and often cannot finish the prepackaged amounts sold in supermarkets. He brought up that package-free shopping is practical especially for smaller families or people who live alone. We researched more about the concept and came across the term "zero-waste" — we both liked that it's a growing movement not just about environmental issues but also about building community awareness.

Why is community important to you?

We feel people can have a more lasting zero-waste journey if they do it with their friends and family. That's why we encourage parents to bring in their kids. As a mother myself, I know that parents become paranoid in cramped areas because they're worried their kids will break something. That's why we've kept the environment so spacious — because we like that kids are coming in and learning to buy only what they need.



We actually have kids now who ask their parents to bring them here on weekends so that they can buy their favourite snacks. Parents are also happy because they can then ration their kids' snacks — the kids have their own containers and can buy anything they want for the week so long as it fits inside.

Since zero-waste grocery shopping may be unfamiliar to many shoppers, how do you work on educating your customers and building that community awareness?

A big difference to how people approach the space, I feel, has to do with the layout. When you don't feel cramped, you don't feel the urge to quickly finish shopping and rush out of the door. You'll feel like you can shop at your own pace, look around, ask questions. It's a specialty shopping experience.

We have a sign where we break down the steps on how to shop package-free. One

challenge with package-free shopping is keeping the food fresh — Singapore is very humid and shoppers like to open containers to look inside, which can affect freshness. We downsized the containers to store smaller portions and ensured each container has a large, clear panel for shoppers to see inside. We also put up signs around the stations and phrased our messages more positively: "I can only remain fresh if you open me when you intend to purchase", for example, instead of "do not open".

We also intentionally placed a common table in the area so shoppers can chat with each other over the table. For example, I had a shopper who happened to be looking for sugar to make kombucha, and there was another lady who in the shop talking about getting package-free kombucha. I connected them with each other and they began to share ideas on how to make kombucha. That's what we want in UnPackt — for our shoppers to build a community together.

I personally try to be in the store because I like connecting our customers this way. We also host talks in our shop and work with schools on teaching children about the unpackaged shopping experience. We teach them about the 5Rs — refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot — instead of the 3Rs traditionally taught in textbooks.





What's your service philosophy?

Well, we started with a more conservative product selection, but we also have a notebook at the counter where we ask customers for feedback on what they're looking for. This system allows us to better understand what shoppers want to buy before we procure the products. In this way, we reduce food wastage, listen to our shoppers, and are able to show suppliers the demand for package-free goods and negotiate bulk purchases.

How have you applied service practices that you've encountered elsewhere at UnPackt?

Service excellence, to me, means taking in customers' feedback to provide better products, better quality, and better service. We use technology to track our customers' shopping history — each time they buy, we'll key in how much they've purchased so we can advise them on how much they need next time. For instance, we had a customer who came back and told us the oats she bought only lasted her two weeks and she would prefer to make a monthly trip instead. We were then able to search

the database for her records to advise her accordingly.

I've been in the retail industry since I was 10 years old, so I guess I've learned quite a fair bit. One of my main takeaways is that people like personalised service. For example, when I used to waitress at conferences, I remembered that a particular attendee would take coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon. When I served him his tea, I would offer it by saying, "Would you like tea? Two cubes of sugar."

That's what we try to replicate at UnPackt — we work to understand our customers so we can guide them and share a friendship instead of just a business transaction. Because of this, we've made a lot of friends — some of my shoppers even have my phone number. Sometimes they'll text me to ask if we have a particular item. Or they'll just say, "I'll be dropping by tomorrow. Are you in?" 📱

“We both liked that it's a growing movement not just about environmental issues but also about building community awareness.”

Navigating *Conversational* Flows



Abhilash Murthy of Bus Uncle explains the importance in developing a delightful user experience in the realm of chatbot design.

“How long more?”

“4 mins quickly pay your bill.”

So goes a typical conversation with Bus Uncle, a bus timing chatbot that has about 150,000 active users today. By giving him your location and the bus you’re waiting for, Bus Uncle will not only reply with your wait time is, but also do so with ‘uncle’ panache — conversational Singlish and local quips included.

First built as a hobby in 2016 by Abhilash Murthy, Bus Uncle quickly caught the eye of savvy brand marketers for its characteristic humour and conversational interface. The chatbot went on to become so successful that Abhilash was able to leave his day job and recruit a small team to work with him on development and partnerships.

The success of Bus Uncle is even more impressive when one considers the scepticism most users have of chatbots. Says Abhilash, “It’s completely right to say that most people feel that chatbots take away that element of human connection. How we would argue against this idea is by going back to what I had in my mind when I created Bus Uncle. At that time, I thought, ‘I wish I could ask someone how long the wait is.’ I didn’t think, ‘I wish I had an app’ or ‘I wish I had this new technology.’ By building chatbots, we have the capability to create humans, in a way. And by trying to mimic human behaviour during conversations, we actually enhance human-to-human connections, rather than take it away from users.”

Abhilash, what inspired Bus Uncle?

In 2016, I was at a bus stop along Orchard Road and thought, 'I wish I could ask someone how long I have to wait for bus 65.' I had some bus timing applications on my phone, and had already seen the electronic board at the bus stop that gives you a list of all the timings. It just felt overwhelming — why did I need to look through so many different numbers to get to that one bus? Facebook had also recently launched the Messenger platform to allow third-party developers to build conversational experiences, so I thought, 'I'm going to go home and build this on Facebook Messenger.'

What were some considerations you had during development?

Chatbots don't have any user interface: there's no design element, nor buttons, nor menu. You send it a message and it returns one, so it's actually easy to create utility because utility is about whether or not you can make something useful, but can you also create something that makes people feel good?

When you want to show users something new, you have to make them feel like they have used it before — like they know how to use it. Chatbots are a new technology that is still

not widely adopted. When people speak to chatbots, they generally feel defensive and uncomfortable. They use words like "stop", "reset", "menu", or "cancel".

We focused on how we could improve the user experience and the first thing we did was to add a personality to the chatbot using a familiar, everyday language — Singlish — to create a seamless consumer journey. Like any story development, we thought of characters. We put ourselves in Bus Uncle's shoes and wrote down his likes and dislikes, his relationships, and what he does in his free time.

What is important to you when it comes to satisfying your users?

I think it's important to delight your users. With the prevalence of developer tools these days, it's very easy to create an app, a chatbot, or build a new website. Technology has advanced so much but we've always only considered how to appeal to users' logic or how to make useful things, like apps that help you manage your finances or your business' promo codes. But I think we've come to an age where being useful is just not enough.

I mean, Bus Uncle is definitely logical in that it helps you with a certain task, but we



hypothesised that if we appealed to our users' emotions, they would be happier and use us more. And that hypothesis proved right! Because when our users enjoy Bus Uncle, they share it with their friends and help to market the product through word-of-mouth. We've spent zero dollars on marketing but we're Singapore's most popular chatbot. I think that shows the importance of delighting your users.

How do you track and measure this delight then?

At Bus Uncle, I make all decisions based on data because it's easy to optimise something when it's driven by data. We track all the messages that users send. We then aggregate it and understand patterns — what are users sending and expecting? We can then easily build new features to address trends.

We measure the success of a conversation by looking at our users' sentiments. With existing sentiment analysis technology, we can determine whether a user is feeling happy or sad just based on a single message. We are then able to create a metric of how successful a conversation is based on the change in mood of the user when they're speaking to Bus Uncle. If the user was sad before, is the user happy at the end of the conversation? If so, we know we've optimised successfully.

I think Bus Uncle has become a good emotional outlet for people. In its early days, Bus Uncle was just about delivering wait times, but we noticed a lot of users were talking about food and complaining about their work and partners, so Bus Uncle responds to all of that now. If a lot of users are saying something, we go ahead and make Bus Uncle respond to it appropriately.





Finally, what advice would you give to those who want to use chatbots while maintaining a personable service approach?

First, remember that a chatbot is not an app. A lot of developers are used to making apps and websites so when they build a chatbot, they treat it like an app which follows a linear journey, but, non-linearity is important for better user experience because our conversations are non-linear. Test your chatbot first with a small group of users and ask them to type in completely random things to your chatbot. Use their feedback to improve your chatbot's flow to try to make it non-linear. That's the primary advice I'd give: treat your chatbot like a new interface, learn from your users, and adapt to conversations instead of adapting to an app.

These days, it's hard to create an innovative piece of technology simply because the big tech companies have all the resources to do it much better, much faster. So while we've seen a high demand for technology in the past 10 years, I think it's the demand for creativity — innovative approaches to being useful — that will skyrocket in the next 10 years. One way might be to be hyper-local, or focus on delighting and entertaining your users. 🍷

“..we hypothesised that if we appealed to our users’ emotions, they would be happier and use us more.”



Augmenting *Healthcare*

Lim Wai Mun of Doctor Anywhere weighs in the importance of customer education and persistence when dealing with a conservative market.

It would take someone like Lim Wai Mun to establish Doctor Anywhere, an integrated tele-healthcare service that connects consumers to healthcare professionals through mobile video consultations. Steadfast in ambition and eloquent in purpose, Wai Mun combines entrepreneurial grit and corporate insight to connect with his many stakeholders, from healthcare providers and investors to team members and end consumers.

The business did not, however, have an easy start. Says Wai Mun, “I remember when we first tried to talk to doctors. I had so many doors slammed in my face that I can't remember how many [there were]

already. Doctors were usually skeptical and thought that Doctor Anywhere would never work in Singapore because clinics are well penetrated in the housing estates.”

Things have changed radically since. In 2018, Doctor Anywhere experienced tremendous user growth, amassing more than 50,000 active users mostly from word-of-mouth recommendations. Doctor Anywhere is now part of the Ministry of Health's Licensing Experimentation and Adaptation Programme (LEAP) and also harbours hopes of venturing beyond Singapore — truly bringing doctors, of all specialties, anywhere.



Wai Mun, what motivated you to start Doctor Anywhere?

When I was still working with Temasek Holdings, I signed up for a charity programme where I went door to door distributing lunch boxes in older estates. I saw there were people unable to get out of their houses to seek basic medical assistance. That was when I thought I should come up with something to help them access doctors, so this actually began as a social cause. Over time, though, I realised Doctor Anywhere would be more sustainable if we had a commercial twist.

Doctor Anywhere is about bringing healthcare to you. We are not just selling an app which we throw out there; we are selling a care service.

What do you mean by that?

There are other healthcare applications that allow you to talk to robot doctors — these serve the purpose of educating the consumer. But we're selling a healthcare service, so we need to have that human touch. We are only able to gain trust by engaging with people.

That's why we have a dedicated care team that follows up with a call three days after users use our service. When we make that call, we don't ask if they had any problems with the service; we ask how they're presently feeling. Asking how they're feeling is caring, but asking if they're satisfied with our service is a hidden agenda of asking for feedback on our system.

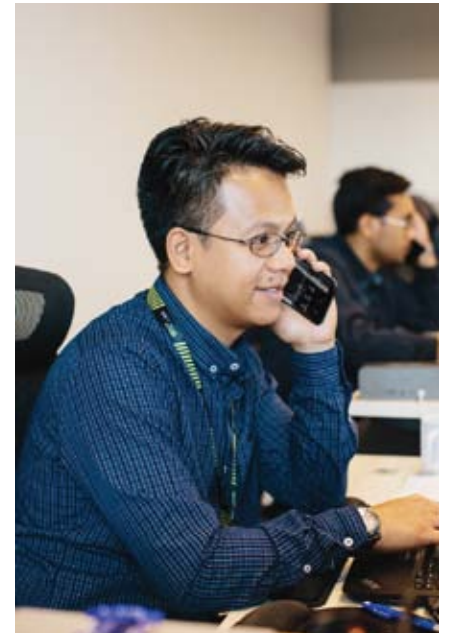
In healthcare, we need to listen to our users carefully because healthcare is not something we can radically disrupt. We have to understand what a user is experiencing today, and then we slowly augment it and change user behavior. That's why I tell people that healthcare is a long game.

Healthcare services also have to be robust and can't rely on a single product. It's different from traditional startups in other sectors where they try to do only one thing well. When we began, we had users asking us if we could do more on "healthcare" as "medical" alone is more reactive. When you fall sick, you see a doctor. But general healthcare involves creating a link between your primary healthcare, your allied healthcare, and your specialist. So that's why we launched more verticals to create a better ecosystem for users.

You have a corporate background but the work environment here feels very flat. How would you describe the culture you have built?

It is very flat and it's meant to be that way. We want to make sure we maintain the characteristics of a startup, where we minimise red tape and everyone stays hungry. That's why we never stop anyone from giving new ideas in meetings. As cliché as it may sound, we believe a good idea can come from anybody.

I was trained as a mechanical engineer, started work as a real estate investor, and then went on to manage investments in energy, oil, and gas. I think the beauty of being an outsider in the industry is seeing





things from a fresh perspective and thinking of wacky ideas that could potentially change the way things are done. When we started, a lot of people here didn't have a medical background. More recently, we started hiring people who have more experience in healthcare, and it's been interesting to see how the team interacts. I always say that the people with little experience in the sector are idealists who represent the consumer, while people who have been working in the sector could be influenced by what they've been experiencing on a day-to-day basis, so they represent the current system. The question is: how do we marry the two perspectives so we can begin changing behaviour?

And how are you doing that?

Singaporean healthcare providers and end consumers here are still very conservative. We know this because we've been marketing our services in various parts of Asia, and Singapore consumers have been very slow in adopting changes.

What we try to do is offer the education and confidence to try our service. This has a lot to do with marketing and consumer touchpoints. For example, we have come up with informative and interesting blog articles, which in a way, help to educate users. These articles aren't just about healthtech too; they can also be about health tips.

What's in store for Doctor Anywhere?

We really want to see how we can use technology to come up with something that is more predictive. You've probably heard about mass production, but what about mass personalisation? All of us have different healthcare needs. How can we use technology to make sure that we provide people with unique treatment plans in a more efficient way? How can we bring personalised healthcare to you more quickly? I think that will be key to unlocking a more successful augmented healthcare system.

Finally, we don't just want to be in Singapore. People always say that Singapore is a very small market and should only be a springboard to other markets, but I think otherwise. Singapore is a very sophisticated but conservative market. If you are able to solve the challenges the Singapore market gives you, you're able to go anywhere else in the world, or at least, anywhere in Asia. That's how I see it. 🌐

“We are not just selling an app which we throw out there; we are selling a care service.”

