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### Dressing the future

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## DRESSING THE FUTURE



*Christopher Halim and Raena Lim of Style Theory review the importance of appropriate automation and necessary systems in growing a young company.*

Christopher Halim and Raena Lim are on a mission to change the future of fashion consumption. Co-founders of Style Theory — a dress rental subscription service — the enterprising duo has propelled their business from a mere Instagram experiment to an inventory of over 15,000 dresses, thousands of subscribers, and a team of 70 in two countries in just two years.

In spite of how young the business is, Christopher and Raena speak with levelled maturity of their vision for Style Theory. They are bright and conversant about systems, structure, and processes. They are also disruptors at heart: hungry for change, motivated by impact, and never happy to leave well enough alone. As Raena anecdotally puts it: “If people request for a square table, we will challenge them by asking why they need a table, why it has to be square, even whether or not it needs legs. We need to see if what they think they need or know is still applicable. Only by challenging what we know and are used to, can we make the changes required in this evolving world.”

**How did Style Theory come about?** Raena (R): It started when Chris pointed out how my incessant complaints about how I had nothing to wear was illogical when I had a wardrobe bursting with clothes. We decided to dig deeper and realised 80% of my clothes hadn’t been touched in the past year. For someone with a finance background, it was obviously not a smart investment. We spoke with around 30 friends and realised none of them utilised more than 50% of their wardrobe. That’s when we realised how inefficient shopping was and we wanted to change it.

Back in January 2016, we didn’t know if the idea would work, so Chris and I decided to test it out with a website we had put together in a day. We set up an Instagram account and started testing by advertising with \$10 a day. Our goal was to have 500 women within the month express interest in the idea. By the end of January, we had 1,500 women on our waitlist.

We officially launched in May 2016 with an inventory for 150 women. Within a month, we were fully subscribed. Today we have thousands of subscribers in Singapore and thousands more on our waitlist. We also just launched in Jakarta to a few hundred subscribers.



**And you have such a large team now! How would you describe yourselves as bosses?** Christopher (C): We're the founders but we don't think of ourselves as empowered to make decisions for the company. Scaling a company successfully requires more than just good performance. On a certain scale, it's important to have processes and structures in place so the team will have the tools and channels for them to track, communicate, and run faster.

**How have you done that?** C: When the company was small, I would just share — informally — about what we were doing and the team was aligned. As we grew, people started saying they were losing touch with what was going on in the company. Passing on information was almost like playing a game of broken telephone.

So now we do a fortnightly all hands meeting, where we share key updates and have Q&A sessions for anyone to ask anything. We also have a monthly one-on-one with our direct subordinates, and our direct subordinates have one-on-ones with their subordinates.

R: That way, no one will be left out. We've started to define our north star, core values, and develop a more formalised way of evaluating people's performances. At the beginning, how and why we do things was straightforward — there wasn't a need to put it down in pen and paper. But now, especially with teams in two countries, the Style Theory way needs to be more visible to provide clarity and consistency.

C: Looking back, one key thing we did was to hire strong people who believed in our vision. We learnt from their experience and adapted it.

R: Yeah, for example, our head of people operations came in to set up our performance management system. We also provided the management team with adequate training so they can implement the same for people in their team.

**What about your customers? How would you describe your service approach?** C: We try our best to make sure we never let our customers down.

R: I remember emailing all our customers when we started to ask why they had joined us and how we could serve their needs. The conversation continued from then and many of our customers continue to play an active role in shaping the wardrobe you see today. Our growth has always been driven heavily by our customers. They spoke about us at the events they organised and brought us on as speakers to gain more exposure. Some of them even gave us free consultations on marketing and branding.



This is how we see it: Style Theory is creating something that hasn't existed in this region. We're doing something people are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with, so customer service is critical to allow them to understand, believe in, and feel comfortable with us. We make sure we can answer all our customers' doubts to make them comfortable.

**What else have you done to increase their comfort level?**

C: We started with customer education through our web, user interface, and social media. We also made sure to be readily available to clarify questions people might have by adopting a chat application as our main mode of communication, instead of calling through a phone service, which can be time-consuming. Getting help should be as easy as texting a friend. Our chat service is manned on weekends and at night to make sure there's always someone to offer recovery options.

We support the conversations in each market locally at the moment. We like this model because teams based locally will have a better context to the problems — like if it's raining or if a place is far away — and will be able to build stronger relationships with our customers. Being in touch with small things can help customers feel like we understand them.

R: To us, customer service is beyond problem solving. It is about building trusted relationships and being able to pre-empt what customers require before problems arise. For example, if the marketing team is looking to acquire new customers who are younger, customer service will identify potential concerns of these customers to make sure the team can serve their needs once they are onboarded.

C: I think the best way to increase customer loyalty is to listen to feedback and continuously work on improvements that can add value to their lives. At the end of the day, our business has grown so much because of how close we are on the ground and how focused we are in making our customers happy. ✦