

MediaTitle	The Heat		
Date	26 Jul 2014	Language	English
Circulation	20,000	Readership	60,000
Section	NEWS	Color	Full Color
Page No	40,41	ArticleSize	1167 cm ²
AdValue	RM 19,781	PR Value	RM 59,343



Going to school to build your business

Owners of small and medium-sized enterprises who find themselves stuck in a rut can now opt for an SME Corporation Malaysia support programme to polish their business and marketing skills



BY OOI SUE HWEI



PHOTOS BY SHARIL AMIN

WHEN Douglas Choong was 21, he decided to nurture a passion to run his own business instead of being an employee all his life. While looking around for opportunities, the marketing graduate discovered that the owner of the custom design sofa business where his mother, Madam Yap Ah Kuen, 50, was employed was planning to give it up as he wanted to retire.

Although there was a huge demand for ready-made sofas, Choong observed that there was also a growing niche market for designed sofas in the country. Quite a number of homes and businesses look for sofas that match their interior decoration. This practice is common among the wealthier. The eldest of four siblings then convinced his mother, who has more than 20 years experience in the sofa business, to fork out RM50,000 of her life savings to buy over the business. "When I first took over, I had zero technical knowledge of the furniture industry, so it was a steep learning curve for me," he says.

At that time, the biggest challenge for him was to get financial assistance to grow the business. He only had five full-time workers who were struggling to meet a business volume averaging about RM60,000 a month. He also encountered staffing problems as there was a lack of skilled workers.

Taking the next step

In 2012, over a chat with friends who also ran their own businesses, Choong

heard about SME Corporation Malaysia's support programmes. Curious for more information, he visited their website and was pleasantly surprised by the list of programmes that he could join.

So the first step he took was to get his business evaluated using SME Corp's SME Competitiveness Rating for Enhancement. Once that was done, Choong took part in the SME@University Programme, which helps develop the business acumen of new and existing entrepreneurs by providing a structured learning opportunity. The course is held at several local universities.

"Besides learning many new things, I also found the programme very beneficial in terms of networking. There were talks given by speakers with years of industry experience," he says.

"The three-month programme that I attended was held at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia). It consists of eight main modules which includes among others, human resources, marketing, business strategy and leadership. In fact, Choong did so well in the programme that he was selected to attend the SME University of Japan. The 12-day programme was fully sponsored with the exception of the airfare.

"I have been to Japan several times for holidays, but that trip opened my eyes to the Japanese business mindset. Besides lectures by both academicians and people from various industries, there were site visits to huge corporations such as Panasonic. I was blown away by their persistence and commitment to innovation," he says.

However, Choong did not stop there. Last year, he signed up for the Business Accelerator Programme in which he was given partial financial assistance to develop his business. In fact, he received a RM50,000 grant to purchase new machin-

Headline	Going to school to build your business		
MediaTitle	The Heat		
Date	26 Jul 2014	Language	English
Circulation	20,000	Readership	60,000
Section	NEWS	Color	Full Color
Page No	40,41	ArticleSize	1167 cm ²
AdValue	RM 19,781	PR Value	RM 59,343

ery like sewing machines for his factory. Armed with the right knowledge and funding, Choong was able to increase production by 30% with the new efficient machinery. With the current employee count of 12 people, he is able to meet orders of RM100,000 a month, of which 70% comes from the local market. Enquiries from around the Southeast Asian region and from Australia are starting to come in.

Dare to dream big


Acknowledging that there were many more areas for him to learn about and

develop, Choong points out that for the moment, establishing the brand name of his business is his top priority.

“We have been quite active in the local OEM (original equipment manufacturer) market in the past, but now we want to establish our own branding as well as apply for ISO certification. Once we have established a brand presence throughout Southeast Asia, we should be able to easily achieve an annual revenue of RM5 million in the next two years,” he says.

By the end of this year, he plans to sign up for another programme by SME Corp

called the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. The latter depicts quality, excellence and distinction of products and services by Malaysian companies.

For Choong, the sky is the limit. “For young entrepreneurs out there, the size of your company is not an issue as long as you have a good business model. If you continue to work hard to enhance it, you will succeed one day. Don’t give up and do not be afraid to ask for help, there are plenty of platforms and channels for young entrepreneurs to tap into, you just need to reach out and grab it,” he advises. 

WHILE growing up, Mohammad Hafidz Rohani spent his free time helping out in his mother’s home based layer cake business in Miri, Sarawak. In December 2009, he finally saved up enough money and garnered the courage to venture out on his own.

It was a huge challenge for Mohammad Hafidz then as he sought to establish a strong reputation for his new brand. At the same time, he saw a potential for his business in line with Miri’s growth as a resort city besides drawing people from the oil and gas industry.

A chance visit to a SME Corporation Malaysia’s One Referral Centre, which provides business advisory services, led him to be among the first batch of students at SME@IIUM. “The programme covered many interesting topics such as innovation, law, marketing and human resource. I was able to channel my newfound knowledge into improving my business,” he says.

In addition, Mohammad Hafidz was selected to attend an additional

Layers of success



Mohammad Hafidz (standing third from right) with his fellow participants at the Said Business School in Oxford, United Kingdom

programme at the Said Business School in Oxford, United Kingdom. “During the final interview to select the finalists, I was interviewed by industry stalwarts

like Datuk Wira (Dr) Ameer Ali Mydin. I believe that the panellists chose me because of the long-term vision and mission that I set for the company,” he

says, admitting that luck probably also played a role.

The six-day programme covered topics on market outlook and branding. “The topic that interested me the most was on branding. We are always keen to brand our products, but sometimes we forget to brand ourselves. Since learning about the power of branding, I have been trying to boost my personal social capital,” he says. His effort is starting to pay off as he was recently awarded the Ikon Belia Usahawan (Youth Entrepreneur Icon) in conjunction with Hari Belia Peringkat Negeri Sarawak (Sarawak Youth Day).

Mohammad Hafidz urges young entrepreneurs to take advantage of the SME Corporation Malaysia’s support programmes. “From a basic start-up, I have been able to grow my business multifold and diversify my product offerings. The knowledge I’ve learnt has helped me set clear goals to boost business revenue. Running a successful business is not an easy task, but now I have the confidence to believe that nothing is impossible,” he points out.

Headline	Going to school to build your business		
MediaTitle	The Heat		
Date	26 Jul 2014	Language	English
Circulation	20,000	Readership	60,000
Section	NEWS	Color	Full Color
Page No	40,41	ArticleSize	1167 cm ²
AdValue	RM 19,781	PR Value	RM 59,343

What SME Corporation Malaysia offers

OWNERS of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are constantly facing the challenge of developing their businesses with little or no resources. Yet, many are not aware that help is at hand. SME Corporation Malaysia, the agency that is tasked with the overall development of SMEs in the country, has various support programmes to offer.

The first step though is to get one's business evaluated using SME Corp's SME Competitiveness Rating for Enhancement (SCORE). The latter is a diagnostic tool used to rate and enhance competitiveness of SMEs based on their performance and capabilities. This enables SME Corp to pinpoint the areas where a business needs improvement and recommend suitable programmes for one to participate in.

One of SME Corp's notable programmes is SME@University Programme. Introduced in June 2011, the programme is based on the SME University of Japan's hands-on approach model for business owners to learn about what it takes to become a world-class CEO.

The three-month long programme consists of eight main modules, which include among others human resources, marketing, business strategy and leadership. It is held at several local universities including Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, HELP University, International Islamic University Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan.

Participants who show exceptional progress are selected to attend the extension programme at either SME University of Japan or the Said Business School in Oxford, United Kingdom.

The Business Accelerator Programme enables SMEs to be assisted through an integrated approach with guidance, including strengthening their core business, building capacity and capability, and facilitating access to financing.

Under the National Mark of Malaysian Brand, another programme by SME Corp in collaboration with SIRIM QAS International Sdn Bhd, Malaysian companies are evaluated to ensure adherence to quality standards, and if successful, its products or services will be given the right to carry the Malaysian Brand.

Headline	Going to school to build your business		
MediaTitle	The Heat		
Date	26 Jul 2014	Language	English
Circulation	20,000	Readership	60,000
Section	NEWS	Color	Full Color
Page No	40,41	ArticleSize	1167 cm ²
AdValue	RM 19,781	PR Value	RM 59,343



Douglas Choong has gained from attending programmes that help hone his business skills



Choong (far right) with his fellow participants at SME University in Japan