

DELIVERING THE GOODS FOR BUSYBEES



Too busy to get your own groceries? Now, your household essentials may just be one click away. Founded in December 2014, honestbee is Asia's first concierge grocery delivery service which brings together a selection of grocery stores and supermarkets in one central online platform from which consumers can pick their choice of products. Once the groceries are ordered, trained shoppers called "shopper bees" will handpick the items and deliver them to the consumer's doorstep within the same day. That way, the startup fills a need in the market for time-strapped executives who are too tied up to head down to stores to do their own shopping. But what sets honestbee apart is not just its business proposition. More significantly, it also serves as a social enterprise that provides flexible work opportunities for the community, as its co-founder and CEO Joel Sng tells us.

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HOW DID HONESTBEE COME ABOUT?

Mr Sng: The previous rendition of honestbee was an online job-matching site that was started because of a common belief – the process of hiring and finding a job online can be better and more fruitful for everyone. We later developed it into honestbee, which allows us to provide the masses who can't work fixed hours with income opportunities.

We chose grocery shopping because of three main reasons. The first is that quality can be standardised and maintained. Secondly, grocery shopping happens more frequently and lastly, stores are distributed which means that more workers do not have to travel very far to get to work. Thus, grocery shopping will generate a higher sustainable demand for labour.

We care about the local community in which we operate our business; and personally, I feel that all businesses should have a positive social impact.

WHY THE NAME HONESTBEE?

We want to build a business where our customers trust us, and at the same time, be as hardworking as bees. Bees are also very adaptable to change, thus increasing their rate of survival – and this is definitely a trait I want my team

members to have. Bees work for the good of the community, whom we service.

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR WORKFORCE.

We have the full-time bees working in the headquarters (HQ) and city offices to support operations, product development, marketing and so on. We also have the part-time bees who are shopper and delivery bees. The shoppers are highly trained to shop for the freshest groceries for our customers, and the delivery bees send customers' orders to them on time within their selected timeslot.

We began with just a small team, but now we have a team of about 130, with 100 based in the HQ in Singapore. On top of that, we have more than 1,200 shopper and delivery bees across the cities where we operate.

YOUR COMPANY HAS EXPANDED RAPIDLY IN ITS SHORT HISTORY. WHAT DO YOU THINK ATTRIBUTES TO ITS GROWTH?

At the heart of honestbee is our technology, and technology is scalable. This facilitates our expansion to the other parts of Asia where there is a demand for our service. It is also important to venture out of Singapore

where the market sizes are bigger.

We are still at the early stage of our business, and we have lots more to do. We are focused on building a great customer experience. We are also focused on helping our partners generate more revenue.

HOW DOES HONESTBEE STAND OUT FROM ITS COMPETITORS?

What differentiates us, making us the leader in this space, is that we are fundamentally a social impact business. We also don't view ourselves as competitors to any businesses out there.

As a social impact business, our focus is on creating sustainable jobs first. We are dedicated to creating economic opportunities for our shoppers – offering people with unconventional schedules, such as students or stay-at-home mothers, good jobs through flexible hours and fair pay.

As an on-demand business, we add value to traditional retailers by bringing them sales, and to our customers by bringing convenience. We are a one-stop grocery store which allows customers to buy from over 10 different stores with one single check-out. At the same time, our platform helps these SME businesses increase sales and be more profitable by bringing them online immediately.

Our commitment to quality, our trained, dedicated concierge shoppers and speedy delivery bees, as well as our ability to help other businesses are our unique advantages that allow us to ship fresh products among other things.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES TO DATE?

The biggest challenge we face is recruiting the right talent to meet the growing needs of our customers and the business. Hiring and talent retention are one of the challenges many startups face. This is because Singapore is a small market, and the skill sets we need are not readily available.

We are very humbled by our low attrition rate here at honestbee. We are also proud to say that there is a strong bond and camaraderie between everyone, where we work hard and play hard. To continue building this bond, we will regularly organise get-togethers for our team to catch up and engage each other better.

The most important thing is to understand the aspirations of all the members in my team, and to help them move towards where they want to be.

WHAT ARE SOME FUTURE PLANS FOR YOUR BUSINESS?

We will be expanding to Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Bangkok and Tokyo.

Our vision is to become Asia's largest online grocery concierge delivery company. We are already seeing exponential growth in all our markets.

The natural next step is to further establish our foothold in other key cities in Asia that are primed and ready to embrace online grocery shopping.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR BUDDING ENTREPRENEURS KEEN TO START THEIR OWN BUSINESS?

It is important to build a scalable business so that when it is time to grow and expand, the business can be easily scaled up. Of course, at the same time when one decides to grow the business, he must make sure that the market is big enough to support the growth. ■

MORE THAN PROFIT ▶
Mr Sng feels that all businesses should have a positive social impact

