

RELAX, THEY'VE GOT YOUR BACK

IT IS common knowledge that Singapore has a demanding and fast-paced work culture. In such an environment, it has become even more crucial for people to unwind and destress.

As a result, the spa and wellness scene is still bustling even in the midst of a slowing economy. But while new entrants tend to come and go, two established players in the industry – Jean Yip Group and Kenko Wellness Spa – have become household names in Singapore.

The SME Magazine speaks to the two chain operators to find out the secrets to their staying power and what some of their future plans are.



PHOTOS: ARTHUR LEE



← BUSINESS ACUMEN
While Ms Yip and Mr Wee are both armed with hair-dressing credentials, they make sure that business development is not neglected

THE BUSINESS OF BEAUTY

WHEN it comes to beauty and wellness services, one local brand that comes to mind is Jean Yip. What started as a hairdressing salon in 1982 has now grown into more than 60 outlets worldwide that span the full spectrum of beauty lifestyle solutions under its umbrella. Name it and they provide it – from hairdressing, hair and scalp care, slimming, beauty and nails to personal care products.

Despite the gloomy economy, the spa and wellness scene is still growing, and players like Jean Yip Group are capitalising on the growing demand. “In all economies, stress is prevalent,” says chairman and founder Jean Yip. “Many people understand the need for stress and wellness management, and are willing to invest in wellness – be it massage, exercise, diet and nutrition.”

Her husband, Mervin Wee, who is Jean Yip’s group managing director and artistic director, and hairdressing/principal of the Jean Yip Academy, adds that the wellness and image business is a “sunrise” business in Singapore that is constantly on people’s minds.

But while they recognise that beauty and wellness is a growing trend in Singapore with low trade barriers to entry, what makes Jean Yip Group stand the test of time is its focus on business skills and strategy.

From its early inception till now, the management team understood that besides passion, creativity and skills, the ability to run a business is crucial to succeed and stand out from competitors.

After all, the two of them know what they are talking about. While they are both armed with hair-dressing credentials from top names such as Alan International Hairdressing School and Vidal Sassoon in London, Jingles International and Toni & Guy, they make sure that business development is not neglected.

After all, business is in their blood. They both

come from families with a business background, with Ms Yip’s father in the hardware industry and Mr Wee’s father in the catering line. That was probably where they got their business acumen from, says Ms Yip. “Many therapists and hairstylists have the skills to do the service but fail to understand business management . . . We invested heavily on our training, branding and R&D (research and development) so that we can be ready for opportunities and brace ourselves for business and market challenges,” she adds.

These include exchange programmes and partnerships to learn and collaborate with other organisations so as to generate new ideas and grow the business.

For example, Jean Yip Group’s business model has been constantly evolving to meet the needs of customers. What began as a hairdressing business back in 1982 by Ms Yip and Mr Wee later expanded to beauty and slimming in 1990, led by Ms Yip’s younger sister, Dawn Yip. More brands were slowly added to the Jean Yip umbrella, and the group also expanded overseas to markets such as Malaysia, Indonesia and China.

Some of its latest brand developments include Cheryl W Wellness & Weight Management, as well as 6 Elements Hair Spa.

“Be it physical outlets or products and services, based on customer feedback, our R&D team works fervently to bring the best to the market,” Ms Yip says.

And while the group’s brand offerings keep changing, some things remain constant. Ms Yip describes the Jean Yip Group as a family business, but with professional skills and knowledge. Aside from her husband, younger sister Ms Dawn Yip is the group operations and marketing director while her brother Oliver Yip is group business development director.

Ms Jean Yip adds that recently, the second generation has just joined. In particular, her eldest daughter Cheryl Wee is not just the ambassador and face of Jean Yip campaigns everywhere, she is also the founder of the new brand Cheryl W Wellness & Weight Management.

“They are very enthusiastic and bring in a lot of new ideas. They come with a different perspective, but they are on track with the first generation,” says Ms Jean Yip.

The organisation looks busy with many plans in the near future. These include the launch of a new product range; the revitalisation of Jean Yip Loft (a one-stop beauty and wellness centre) within the next two years; as well as an e-commerce product plan in Japan.

Looking around the VivoCity outlet, Ms Yip points out that while the salons may be part of a large chain, the quality and standard in each and every salon is taken care of.

She adds that the company sees a positive growth in the next five to 10 years in the Asia market. Looking further ahead, it is looking to explore the European market as well, she says. “It’s getting very competitive, and we just have to be ahead.” ■

AMPING UP ITS GAME

ANOTHER brand that has stood the test of time is Kenko Wellness Spa. One of Singapore’s largest chain of foot reflexology and massage services, its outlets are a familiar sight around town.

Starting from a humble shop in Joo Chiat in 1991, it has now grown to become Kenko Holdings with nine outlets here, and a growing presence in Malaysia, Indonesia and India.

Founder Jimi Tan, who is the group executive chairman, shares that Kenko means “healthy” in Japanese as the chain had its roots in treating and healing customers who had health issues such as rheumatism, migraines and even depression.

Prior to Kenko, the shop was called a more generic Healthy Family back in its Joo Chiat days. While Kenko’s outlets now look inviting and luxurious, Mr Tan says that its first shop was a simple outfit in an area surrounded by bars – which was not very suitable for a clean, healthy massage parlour.

And contrary to many shop owners these days, Mr Tan was the one rolling up his sleeves and providing massage and reflexology services to customers. Before he opened his shop, he had spent two years doing house calls and honing his craft.

His interest in reflexology and massage began when he was a child, when he learnt foot reflexology from his grandmother. He used to follow her when she did “tuina” (Chinese therapeutic massage) for others. When Mr Tan grew older, he took the trade more seriously and began learning from many sources such as Thai massage, Chinese traditional massage and acupuncture, American style and Japanese shiatsu, just to name a few influences. He then combined them to create his own Kenko style of reflexology, which is now the brand’s signature offering.

But in the first six months at Joo Chiat, business was dismal. “On the first day, I had zero customers when I opened. I had to ask my insurance agent friends to come and support me because I bought (products) from them last time,” he recalls. But Mr Tan pressed on and soon after, word spread after customers recommended his services. His customers were a diverse mix of ethnicities and “came from everywhere” – even people from overseas sought him out.

Six years later, he opened a branch in Tanglin Shopping Centre. Things moved quickly thereafter;





GOOD HEALTH
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in the two years after that, three more shops were opened in the town area and the original shop in Joo Chiat was closed.

Kenko now has nine outlets in central locations around Singapore, with VivoCity being one of them. While the number is down from 14 outlets originally, Mr Tan shares that the cut-back was due to a shortage of manpower as the business was still doing well.

One unique concept that Mr Tan has introduced to his Kenko outlets is fish spa therapy, which was inspired by a visit to Japan. While having fish nibble at one's feet in tanks are now quite common, it was a novelty when it was brought in about eight years ago.

At Kenko, a special breed of fish called doctor fish are used to get rid of dead skin on customers' feet. To ensure hygiene, ultra violet light is used to kill germs in tanks where the fish are kept, in addition to a top-notch water filtering system. Mr Tan says that there are many knock-offs these days that use other types of fish that bite, but do not remove the skin. Such fish may also be kept in dirty tanks, which could lead to skin problems in customers.

Fish spa therapy is just one way that Kenko is amping up its game. It is also constantly improving on its standards and ambience in order to keep up with the competition. From its décor to the type of music played, Mr Tan says, it is his mission to make sure that customers get their money's worth and leave satisfied.

For instance, he points out that the masseuses are prohibited from conversing to each other during a massage or from turning on the television to prevent

a noisy environment. "We don't want the customer to spend money and get nothing in return. We want to make sure they relax and feel good . . . when they walk, they feel lighter and rejuvenated. We don't want to waste their time."

While he recognises that the economy is not doing well, Mr Tan is a firm believer that as long as you are doing a good job, there is "no such thing as no business". He raises his Swatow group of restaurants, which he also owns, as an example. "Even though the economy is bad, queues are still long. If you do something well, people will come."

In the near future, he is looking at teaching more students at Kenko Academy, which is a training centre providing WSQ certified courses for spa services. He says that he has no qualms teaching massage skills – even to his competitors. "My mission is to make sure that everyone is using the right method and right feelings to massage. Yes, even when I massage, I massage with feelings and not just go through the motions," shares Mr Tan.

Up till now, he still gives foot massages and washes the feet of others. "I don't feel bad. I don't mind as there's nothing wrong. When I give a massage, no one has ever looked down on me because I make sure I do a very good job. They thank me instead," he says. ■

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