

# TURNING THE TABLES



Two very different furniture retail stores in Singapore, Journey East and Castlery, share what they do – from selling uniquely designed furniture to building its own supply chain – in order to differentiate themselves from the rest



PHOTOS: KELVIN CHING



## ← HANDS ON

Ms Sam says she loves opening boxes and taking out new things at Journey East's Mapletree-owned warehouse at Chai Chee, Bedok

While the eco-friendly aspect of its furniture is a strong selling point, Journey East also aims to differentiate itself with truly unique designs.

It has launched its own two-part furniture collection PLAYplay. A bold take on modern living, the second PLAYplay collection launched in March this year is flavourful and fun-loving. It includes the Pong dining table with hidden compartments to store equipment for an impromptu game of table tennis and the Bazaar desk which functions both as a desk and a shelf.

Its most popular piece of furniture is the Qeeboo rabbit chair by Italian designer Stefano Giovannoni. The body of the rabbit is the seat while the rabbit's ears are the back of the chair. Ms Sam says jocularly: "It is a playful piece that puts a smile on anyone's face. I drive a vintage Volkswagen Beetle, and it has the same effect. It's just one of those happy people things."

Asked if her keen sense of entrepreneurship runs in the family, Ms Sam says: "It may have come from my maternal grandfather who used to run a family supermarket in Madagascar. He also had his own mercantile business on a ship."

At Journey East, Ms Sam sources for brands and works closely with its network in Indonesia to find vintage pieces and restore them. To stay abreast of technology, Ms Sam and her team are currently developing an online buying platform so that customers can make purchases with greater ease.

Like her mother who used to help out with the day-to-day operations in the family supermarket, Ms Sam does not hesitate to get her hands dirty at Journey East's Mapletree-owned warehouse at Chai Chee, Bedok. She confesses: "I love opening boxes, taking out new things and adding the price tag to them."

With a mini bar in the showroom, shopping for furniture at Journey East is certainly quite the experience. "This is not just a shop. If people open themselves up to us, they can have a lot of fun here. When it was our marketing manager Terence's birthday, we were getting the cake ready when two customers walked in. After asking them to sing happy birthday to him, we all hid. When Terence came out, he was quite taken aback when two strangers started singing to him," says Ms Sam as she laughed at the recollection of the bizarre situation.

Ms Sam believes that good customer service lies at the heart of the business, saying: "In many cases, a lot of energy is spent fighting fires. Without the stress of managing customer expectations and complaints, we can concentrate on more challenging things like sourcing for new collections and keeping our products interesting."

In the future, Ms Sam hopes to see Journey East involved in more collaborations with local and international designers. "When brands want to establish themselves in an important Asian market, they look at Singapore. And there is a lot more potential for Journey East now that we've established ourselves in the community."

She quips: "It would be great to have other Journey East stores established in other markets in the world. That's our dream." ■

## GUNG-HO SPIRIT

WHILE cruising along the roads in Indonesia years ago, Anita Sam spotted a vintage dressing table on top of a moving truck. Her heart set on it, she stopped the truck at a red light and bought it right off the vehicle.

In the old days, that was just one of her many escapades sourcing for wood antiques for her furniture retail store Journey East. Ms Sam says: "I love vintage furniture because it's a way of recycling. It's sustainable, and you're giving something old a new lease of life."

"Back then, furniture was mostly mass produced, and I didn't feel a connection to them. There weren't many vintage items in Singapore either," she adds.

Seeking to fill the gap in the market, Madagascar-born Ms Sam founded Journey East in 1995 with Indonesia-based Dutchman Raymond Davis, whom her husband linked her up with.

Her spirit to starting the business may be perceived by some Singaporeans as "gung-ho". Before co-founding Journey East, she previously worked as a business development manager at a lingerie chain. After talking to Mr Davis, with whom she used to explore torn-down properties in Indonesia for used teak, she handed in her letter of resignation the very next day. She says: "If you have a vision that you're passionate about and you're prepared to work really hard, then go ahead with it!"

Journey East's first outlet in Dempsey Hill sold primarily vintage and retro collectibles representative of the bygone Dutch colonial era. Now, it is a multi-brand furniture retailer carrying 10 brands such as d-Bodhi and District Eight. The range of its furniture has expanded to include eco-friendly reclaimed teak wood furniture, industrial styled furnishings and modern designer furniture pieces.

## ONLINE FOCUS

FURNITURE retail is a saturated market with stiff competition, but local firm Castlery is fast differentiating itself from the pack with e-commerce, technology and ownership of the entire supply chain.

Unlike the traditional brick-and-mortar business model, Castlery started its evolution in 2015 into an integrated omni-channel retailer which also focuses on its online platform to drive growth – a strategy that seems to be paying off as it has been achieving 100 per cent year-on-year revenue growth in the past few years. Castlery's co-founder and chief technology officer Zhou Zhiwei says: "Our e-commerce site is the entry point for customers. Like a shopfront, every piece of information on the website is critical for our customers. That is also how we differentiate ourselves as a brand."

Today, the furniture retailer may not have any physical stores, but the co-founders realised early on that consumers in Singapore want to be able to feel and see the furniture personally. A 10,000 sq ft showroom at Alexandra Road complements Castlery's e-commerce platform for an online-to-offline experience.

An important component of e-commerce is a robust fulfilment and inventory storage system, and this is made possible with its warehouse spanning 30,000 sq ft in Mapletree's Logistics Hub in Toh Guan Road.

Launched in 2013, the business came about when two co-founders Declan Ee and Fred Ji saw a gap in the furniture market when they were trying to furnish their own homes. Dismayed by the high prices and lack of design options, they decided to do something about it. They roped in Mr Zhou and together, they started selling furniture online in 2013.

The business slowly grew and by 2014, they took the plunge and invested S\$1 million of their own funds to scale operations. It was also then that their fourth co-founder and chief operating officer Travers Tan was brought in.

One significant decision that the co-founders made was to build its own supply chain. The business invests in its own factories across Asia including Vietnam, Malaysia, India and China. Mr Zhou explains: "If you're buying the mature product, you can't control the price, quality or design as much."

By removing the middlemen in the process, Castlery is able to offer affordable products. It is also better able to do quality checks on its products to ensure that they are up to mark. Mr Zhou stresses that the design and quality are of utmost importance.

Some 90 per cent of the designs are done in-house, with plans to push for 100 per cent in the near future.





But this does not mean that the company is not open to injections of new ideas. In May this year, it launched Castlery Feat, a collaboration with six well-known international designers. Its product range includes tables, couches, consoles, shelving and chairs, which was very “well-received” by customers.

Aesthetics and quality control may be significant, but technology is key to making it all flow efficiently. Mr Zhou shares that its e-commerce website, internal enterprise resource planning (ERP)

maintained by a team of about seven software engineers, headed by lead software engineer Wang Liyong. He quips: “Normally you won’t see so many engineers in a furniture company, but technology is a big differentiator for us.” All the departments work on the ERP system, ranging from sales to operations to the purchasing team.

Castlery has also invested in its own warehouse management system, which now has an almost 100 per cent inventory accuracy. This gives the company

### ◀ THE TECH WAY

*Castlery’s robust fulfilment and inventory storage system is made possible with its warehouse spanning 30,000 sq ft in Mapletree’s Logistics Hub in Toh Guan Road, say lead software engineer, Wang Liyong (left), and co-founder and CTO, Zhou Zhiwei*

system, and warehouse management system which is used in its Mapletree warehouse, are all connected. “From the moment our customer places the order and until the person receives the item, it’s all highly integrated. Information flows from purchase to fulfilment based on this system.”

The ERP system was built inhouse and

real-time data of available inventory for sale on its website. Mr Zhou adds that the lead time that customers see on the website for their items to get delivered is also based on the information provided by the extensive system.

Despite the firm’s relatively young age of four years, it has grown rapidly. It recently opened its first store in Sydney, Australia.

Mr Zhou observes that the consumers in Australia have “similar design tastes” compared with those in Singapore.

The challenges for the company’s venture there is to build trust as it is not Australian, adds Mr Zhou. As it is in a very new market, it is also in the process of understanding the logistics, operations flow, as well as how to handle the consumer experience. He says “If Australia is successful and sustainable, we can have satellite studios and experience centres. Our end goal is to launch nation-wide in Australia.” ■

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