

HOW DID OMNISTREAM COME ABOUT?

I used to be a quant trader in a previous life. When I moved back to Asia from New York several years ago, I observed that automated trading can only be as good as the data provided to the models, and that human machine symbiosis allows speed-dependent problems to be solved in a better way.

I felt that in South-east Asia, the astronomical speed of development and change has essentially guaranteed that the next generation of entrepreneurs will be very different from the last. Thus, I saw an opportunity to use the same data and automation-driven thinking to build an enterprise company servicing the region that I grew up in. In fact, I feel that the same data and highly automated processes can also be used to expedite profits for Asian enterprises, the same way hedge funds use data to create profit.

In this process, I fell back in love with South-east Asia, the energy, the “can do” attitude, and the unique sense of pride in this region. Part of the motivation every morning is building a company that is truly from this region, and servicing its unique needs.

WHY IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SUCH BUSINESSES?

We're outcomes-focused and the only enterprise technology company that allows customers to pay us based on outcomes. We call ourselves outcomes-as-a-service. For every \$1 in incremental profits our customers make, we get some percentage. We only win if our customers win – this guarantees a win-win for all. We're proud of being able to offer this model because it means that we've thoroughly tested our technology and our methods for the realities of emerging markets.

We see a lot of demand for this in South-east Asia, especially among conglomerates, because there has been a legacy of large foreign consultancies/technology providers who have come in and implemented solutions that do not work at all in the realities of emerging markets.

We tend to service retailers who are trying to expand aggressively while slightly modifying businesses processes or cost structures to alter business models. Traditionally speaking, had these retailers tried to work with traditional vendors or consultants, this type of growth would have longer payback periods with higher upfront investments. Our billing method allows retailers to move costs from capex to opex, allowing them to take more aggressive growth strategies.

We also focus on white space or the data you don't have. In general, I believe that companies spend too much time looking at the limited datasets they hold internally. To challenge existing processes or cost structures, you have to think about white space. That is generally hidden in data you don't have. This is why we place heavy emphasis on data about your operating environment, external trends, and other data sources that live outside your business.

So for example, one of our bestselling features is new store site selection and assortment planning for localised conditions. Whether a new store has a two-year payback, or a 20-year payback depends primarily on external factors.

We pride ourselves on being Asia-based and focused, so we understand how emerging markets are different. One motivator for me was always to build a world-class enterprise business out of South-east Asia. This market is deeply underserved by the global players. To do this, we are headquartered here, and we all spend most of our time in the markets we work in.

WAS ENTREPRENEURSHIP SOMETHING YOU WERE ALWAYS KEEN ON?

I don't think I ever woke up and said “I want to be an entrepreneur.” It happened to me gradually as the desire to build and accomplish something grew inside me. I realised

HELPING RETAILERS GROW

Singapore-headquartered startup Omnistream has developed technology services for retailers in the region. CEO and founder Wendy Chen (right) shares how the firm offers data insights, retail strategy and to grow their business.

AS TOLD TO VIVIEN SHIAO



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

that I wanted to be a meaningful world-class enterprise player servicing emerging markets first.

WHAT ARE SOME INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT RETAIL THAT SMES HERE SHOULD REALLY THINK ABOUT?

What's your strategy? Is it a long-term play or just short-term incremental?

It is generally true that incumbents have more money, time and resources. They will win when new projects are incremental. This means that SMEs should generally think about whether they are addressing projects that require too much process or cost structure change for incumbents to compete. Are you low cost? Are you differentiated? What role does this new channel play in your long-term strategy? These definitions need to be clearly out there.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF ACHIEVING?

I think I am most proud of our ability to execute outcomes-as-a-service model at Omnistream.

I've come to realise that company culture is largely how you hire, promote, fire people. We've really made outcomes-driven service and product development a core principle of our company. This involved some difficult decisions, but we are now truly aligned with our markets.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR YOUR BUSINESS?

Hiring people who are a cultural fit is one of the biggest

challenges. The thing is that we don't just want smart people but humble people with intellectual honesty about when something is or is not working. We also want people with a dedicated passion for emerging markets.

In addition, hiring people who understand the operational challenges in emerging markets is yet another issue. Emerging markets aren't like the US or Europe. You don't just put things on a truck and have them magically, neatly show up at the stores. Enterprises here often have aggressive appetites for change, but they have different operational limitations. It is not easy to find suitable resources all the time.

Data integrity can also prove to be quite a challenge at times. Actually, there are a lot of duplicate data or missing data when dealing in emerging markets. It's unsexy, but the most important part of a data pipeline.

COULD YOU SHARE SOME OF YOUR UPCOMING PLANS AND GOALS?

Market-wise, we are expanding. We are launching in several countries this year, including Vietnam and Myanmar.

We are also planning for product refinement. While big enterprise players are always adding features, we are removing features that don't generate outcomes (we get paid when our customers win, so we are constantly removing fancy-looking front ends that nobody uses).

Another thing in the pipeline is data refinement. We are adding proprietary data sets that are refined from open data. This includes hyper localised population densities and traffic movements. ■