



PHOTO: KELVIN CHING

SMALL BUT SPUNKY

One is a fast fashion accessory retail shop that aims to become a one-stop shopping destination for fashion goods. The other is a business to business printing company aiming to go digital. The bosses of Kimoj and Youprint talk about the grit needed for a small SME to stay ahead of the big boys.

SOMETHING NEW EVERY TIME

FROM designer goods to lifestyle accessories, costume jewellery and street style eyewear, Kimoj has everything that will deck out a fashionista. The fast fashion accessory retail shop follows its director Harry Xue's vision that "It's all about style, all about daily fashion."

The fashion brand is constantly keeping up to date with the latest global fashion trends. Fashionistas can get the latest at Kimoj's several outlets including one at Mapletree's HarbourFront Centre. Kimoj is a "one-stop shopping destination for fashion goods", says Mr Xue. "Our style keeps changing weekly, we make sure everything in our shop is of the latest style and of limited quantity. We welcome people to come and explore - you will find new things every time."

"This type of (fast fashion accessory retail) concept is very popular in (South) Korea, Japan and Hong Kong," he adds. "In Singapore... we found it needed some changes and a new concept." Kimoj was formed to fill that gap.

Founded in 2013, Kimoj is a part of Maestrolagic, a trading and retail company that Mr Xue started in 2009. Until 2013, Maestrolagic had been supplying the very same fashion accessories and goods that Kimoj currently sells to retailers such as Isetan and Metro. As part of that business, Maestrolagic worked closely with designer houses in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and China.

What drove Mr Xue to set up Kimoj was partly due to a need for a refresh. "Basically, the market needs a good concept and something special," he says. "The young people in Singapore have very different tastes - they like things to keep changing, they like unique styles, but at affordable prices." He also notes that consumers also find

that merchandise at departmental stores tend to be "old-fashioned, good quality but lacking fresh styles, and with high prices". In response to this, Kimoj was formed with the goal to "bring something with better value for money" says Mr Xue.

Mr Xue realised then that if he operated his own outlets, outside of department stores, he could cut costs, as well as lower prices. He could sell the products at 20 per cent cheaper than the department stores, due to no longer needing to meet the high margins of departmental stores.

So Mr Xue talked to his partner, a South Korean entrepreneur who currently manages around 40 design companies located across Asia, and who also has a close relationship with several Korean design houses. They both decided to start their own retail network, with the partner starting her own retail business in South Korea under a different name. Both companies are separate entities, but they collaborate on merchandising and the supply chain, with Kimoj buying its goods from the partner's companies.

"We wanted our own network, instead of operating on other companies' premises," said Mr Xue. "Now, we have better control over merchandise, over the pricing, over the style of the shop, and we now have less restrictions."

When asked if he wears the products that he sells, Mr Xue says that he does, but adds: "I like wearing glasses but I don't wear them for long." He explains in true fast fashion style: "Everytime I get a new style, I wear it for just a week, or a few days. I keep changing as I have access to the full collection, as well as the latest styles."

Before focusing on Kimoj, he had attempted to break into the optical trade with a company called Evottica. That did not fare very well due to several factors such as the arrival in Singapore of Japanese optical chain Owndays in the same period, resulting in direct competition with a far larger company, as well as issues in hiring optometrists due to the competition. Evottica closed after two years.

GROWTH PATH
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Kimoj does not have optometrists as it sells sunglasses and spectacle frames without prescription lenses. But it does recommend opticians. It also sells earrings, necklaces, rings, hair accessories, handbags and cosmetic mirrors. All the items are sourced from China, South Korea and Taiwan.

Mr Xue plans to expand the company overseas, with the aim of exporting its concept to Hong Kong, Thailand, China, Japan and South Korea, possibly as soon as 2019. He is confident that the fashion accessory industry will only grow. There are plans to list, though not for another five years yet, as Mr Xue notes that retail businesses have less clear cut conditions for listing. ■



PHOTO: KELVIN CHING



FACING CHALLENGES HEAD ON

ADRIAN Kok is not one to shy away from challenges.

With no training in the printing industry, he started a company that provides printing services in a mostly business to business model. And now that almost every industry is facing technological disruptions, he is ready to take the company digital from offering mostly print services.

Mr Kok, as director of Youprint, started the company with two other colleagues in 2013 as they saw a demand in the print industry and wanted to capitalise on it. The small company, nestled in Mapletree's Kallang Basin 4 cluster, has faced its fair share of challenges. Mr Kok says: "There are a lot of companies that are bigger than us, so we had to learn how to budget. We also had to learn how to give better customer service."

Youprint projected itself by offering better quality printing services and more competitive pricing. Customer service became a focus as it took client feedback seriously. From this,

it started to pick up more customers.

Initially, the small team had to do everything themselves, including printing and installing the products. Mr Kok says that he often ended up arguing with his colleagues. Most of the arguments arose as the staff were not familiar with the industry, having come from different backgrounds.

He did not draw any salary from the company for at least a year. Even today, the company still subsists on a very tight budget. Mr Kok says that he does not think that the company has taken off. "When you think you succeed, that's the day you're dying," he says. The company still forces itself to survive on a tight budget, all while generating returns.

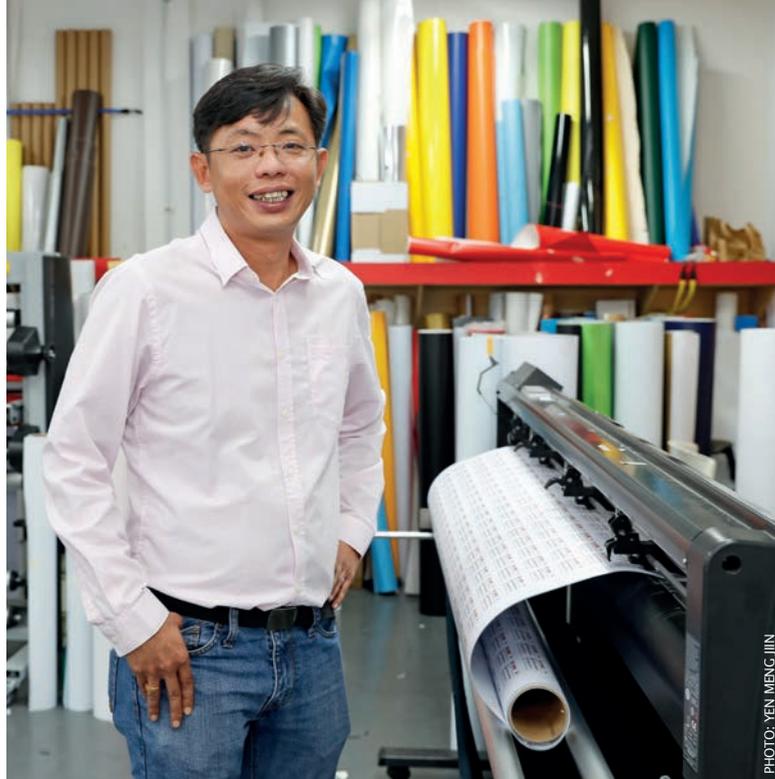
One of the most memorable projects that Youprint has done was for Mapletree. It was required to print and install SG50 branding on 20 to 30 buildings in two weeks. This was challenging as in the limited timeframe, Youprint had to design, print and execute the project. Additionally, weather was also a concern, due to safety reasons.

For Mr Kok, the project also holds special meaning as it marked Singapore's 50th birthday. Still, that does not mean that he found it easy. "It was the hardest two weeks of my life," he says.

The printing industry is dependent on manpower as a project typically involves a site reconnaissance, advising the client on the materials to be used, how long they ought to be used for, as well as the final execution of materials. Additionally, several of the projects done by Youprint require on-site installation.

While the printing portion can be automated, human action is still required for the rest of the project. But not one to be left behind, Youprint has begun using automation on the production level as well. It uses a customer service management and workflow software, which it hopes will be live by November. "We are always looking out on how to integrate our current workflow with new technology so we can leverage on the productivity and, importantly, speed," Mr Kok says.

The company has taken a Productivity Solutions Grant (PSG) from the government. This has gone towards a programme that enables it to share workflow with its



customers, allowing its customers to track the progress of projects from start to finish.

Perhaps the biggest challenge that Youprint faces is the move towards a digital landscape. To cope, the company is currently researching on materials to move into the digital space. It intends to expand to Malaysia, where it will focus on light-emitting diode (LED) screens, and also LED billboards. It also intends to create LED digital display screens.

Another challenge that threatens Youprint is the increase of online advertising. Online advertising has steadily gained

◀ UNDAUNTED

Mr Kok is ready to take the company digital from offering mostly print services

popularity as it is a less costly way for businesses to advertise. However, Mr Kok and his colleagues are not intimidated by this development. Instead, the company now uses Google to reach out to their customers. Mr Kok said: "Technology is a part of us now, so we have to learn how to live with it."

Currently, Youprint's customer relationship management software is on the Google platform. Mr Kok said that it allows for an efficient way to communicate between companies and departments. It intends to digitalise all work processes in the near future.

While interactive advertisements are also in its future, Youprint hopes to focus on making digital screens before proceeding to interactive advertisements. Just like when it started, Youprint is diving into uncharted waters. This does not daunt Mr Kok, however. When Youprint first began, he learnt by making mistakes. He says: "Mistakes are the greatest teachers in life."

Learning is only part of the equation. The other is tenacity. He adds: "Grit is very important, because the initial part is very tough. You have to be determined." ■

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