

BEYOND BEAUTY

Local salons are going beyond skin deep treatments to focus on their clients' needs and well-being. Team Salon was one of the first salons to offer a botanical therapy scalp treatment that integrates chakra energy healing. Nail Palace has launched its own range of nail products that are free from these chemicals. We find out what else these firms are doing to compete in a fickle industry.



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

NAILING A BUSINESS



A TAKE CARE
Nail Palace has a range of nail products that are free from chemicals like paraben, formaldehyde, toluene, xylene and more

DESPITE the uncertainty of a man having to take over a chain of stores mainly targeted at women, Kaiden Cheng, managing director of Nail Palace, took up the challenge.

Nail Palace was started in 2002 by his mother, Cheng Chiew Lin. She travels widely, and frequents nail bars overseas. She wanted to get her nail extensions done, but could not find an accessible store in Singapore that

provides the service.

Mr Cheng says: "Most nail salons back then only did quick manicure services, and they were not really professionally trained in extension services and even more complicated designs. Although there were a lot of hair, facial and skincare salons, there were no big nail salons that had these services readily available."

Nail Palace's first store opened in Bencoolen, and Ms Cheng realised that there was a demand for nail services beyond a basic manicure in Singapore. "We were considered one of the pioneers in this industry. When we first opened in Bencoolen, suddenly a lot of competitors opened just beside us," recalls Mr Cheng.

Wanting to avoid a petty power struggle with the other stores in the same area, Nail Palace decided to expand into the heartland malls and shuttered the doors of its first store. Currently, its head office is located at Mapletree's industrial estate at Defu Lane. It now has 19 outlets, with plans to open stores in Causeway Point, Parkway Parade and Century Square.

Mr Cheng was then asked by his mother to manage the company as she wanted more time to travel the world. He says: "At that point of time, you would think that it is weird for a guy to take over the biggest nail chain in Singapore, but I took up the challenge and

tried to see what I can do."

He became managing director in 2015. He observed then that nail bars were only providing services that catered to making nails look pretty, but he wanted to go even further. "Taking care of your hands and feet is as important as taking care of your hair and face because they do show our age, especially," he says. "Having good nail care is more than just having pretty nails."

He found out that some chemicals commonly used in nail products may be harmful to our bodies; and for that reason, Nail Palace has launched a range of nail products that are free from chemicals such as paraben, formaldehyde, toluene, xylene and more.

He even uses Nail Palace's products on himself, guaranteeing the product's efficiency. "Manufacturing a line of products ourselves is really one of my proudest achievements because I don't think many people can have this chance. I think I am very lucky to be able to work under my mother and get into this home-established brand."

Mr Cheng has noticed that chain stores such as Guardian and Watsons do not have a large range of nail care products, and hopes that Nail Palace's line of products can make their way onto the shelves of local pharmacies. "I used to source for beauty products for my customers, and I

realised that Singapore's market has a lot of products for your face. If you go to Watsons, you can choose from a whole range of similar facial products, but if you just want to find a cuticle remover, there're about three bottles to choose from. Our choice of nail products is really restricted.

"However, if you go to the United States, their drugstores carry a range of nail products. There is a big market for this. If a lot of people in Japan and the US are looking for these products and services, we should also have them in Singapore." He wants to be able to provide Singaporeans with access to easily available complete nail treatments.

Although the company is currently doing well, Mr Cheng mentions that it is still trying to solve a problem that has plagued it since the start - hiring fresh blood. "Younger Singaporeans are not keen in entering the skilled services trade. Our pay is good, but I feel that they prefer a desk job more."

Frustrated by this stigma, he says: "If you go to America, Japan or South Korea, the manicurists working at nail bars are proud of themselves and their work. It's an art - there's nothing inferior about our line of work when compared to a desk job."

He explains that with the even tighter

foreign worker quotas implemented by the Singapore government, the company is to trying to entice locals to join. "What we are doing currently is that we are working with ITEs, see if we can spur some interest," he says. "ITE has some courses targeted at the beauty services line, but their focus is on hair and face. They don't have a focus on nails, which is why we are trying to work with them to create a new syllabus. This is one thing which we are trying in order to attract more people to our trade."

Another thing that Nail Palace hopes to achieve in the future is to expand internationally and take its products to retail stores overseas. "Maybe 10 years down the road, we can also open our own nail academy where people from other countries come to learn from us," he adds. ■

SELF CARE >
Mr Cheng (right) uses Nail Palace's products on himself, guaranteeing the product's efficiency



TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

FROM just a single outlet at Parkway Parade in 1985, home-grown hairdressing chain Team Salon now boasts six venues across Singapore, with plans for more on the horizon.

When quizzed on how Team Salon has come so far, founder Jean Tong answers that the clue is, in fact, in the name. "At that time, lots of salon founders would open flashy eponymous salons, named after themselves," she says. "Team Salon got its name because I believe that teamwork is fundamental to the success of our business, and that remains a key tenet of our company culture to this day."

Team Salon outlets are scattered in Siglap, Bukit Timah, Jurong East, VivoCity, Buona Vista, along with its original location at Marine Parade.

With business aplenty and the company seemingly on the up, things look rosy for founder Ms Tong and her younger sister cum business partner, Liz Tong. However, it was not always like this for the industrious duo.

After 16 years at its location at Wisma Atria, Team Salon was instructed by the authorities to close that outlet, following a revamp of Orchard Road. This came as a blow to the two sisters as the Wisma Atria salon was the company's second outlet and first foray into expansion. The younger Ms Tong describes it as the lowest point in the company's history.

But they picked up and carried on. "I've always believed that grit is key to success," she says. "We ploughed on, and from 2003 to 2013, expanded to six locations in the space of a decade."

Despite a plethora of different hairstylists in today's market, the older Ms Tong believes that what truly sets Team Salon apart is the unique relationships that they have with each customer.

"Our priority at Team Salon is our client's image, so it's important that we consider both what they want and what looks good on them, and try to give them a style that balances both. This is how trust is built," she says. "We have a long history in the industry, and this experience and credibility has earned the trust of our clients."

In addition, Team Salon's continual attempts to innovate and stay ahead of the curve has earned them the respect and appreciation of customers, adds Ms Jean Tong. "Team Salon is constantly evolving - just like how as people we never stop learning, our business continues to be a work in progress," she states.

Indeed, Team Salon was one of the first salons to offer a botanical therapy scalp treatment that integrates chakra energy healing. Every outlet now offers organic chamomile and liquorice root comfort tea for patrons, as well as special photo ring lamps for that perfect "after" selfie for social media.

Having firmly established themselves as major players in the beauty industry, the sisters are now determined to look beyond their business alone, and start giving back to the community at large.

Team Salon is a strong supporter of the Aveda Earth Month campaign, proceeds from which are used to fund water-related projects in over 85 countries. This year, the focus is on a non-profit organisation called charity: water which brings clean water to rural areas in developing countries. With 663 million people worldwide lacking

Cutting Edge

access to clean water, the sisters describe this as a pressing concern facing the international community.

“For Aveda Earth Month 2019, we’ll be helping to raise funds through two channels,” explains Ms Liz Tong. “First, by donating our team skills to do charity haircuts, with 100 per cent of proceeds going to the Singapore Environmental Council. And second, by retailing a limited edition Earth Month hand and body wash – 100 per cent of the purchase price for each bottle will give clean water to one person living in India, Madagascar, Nepal or Ethiopia.”

Team Salon has also taken steps to make its business more eco-friendly, in the name of environmental conservation. The company has invested in A4-sized iPads in all locations to reduce paper usage, and has introduced QR code vouchers and name cards to minimise wastage. There is also a strict recycling policy in all salons.

Despite its success in Singapore, however, Team Salon has so far expressed little interest in taking its business abroad. Despite other local startups making such a jump in recent years, the Tong sisters take a different viewpoint on international expansion.

Citing quality control and an unwillingness to dilute the Team Salon brand as a factor in their decision not to expand overseas so far, Ms Jean Tong also alludes to the strength of the Singapore market, which makes expansion a luxury rather than a necessity.

“Singapore is one of the most business-friendly



PULLING TOGETHER

At their outlet in VivoCity, sisters and business partners Jean Tong (left) and Liz Tong say that teamwork is fundamental to the success of Team Salon, and it remains a key tenet of its company culture

PHOTO: JASON QUAH

countries in the world; there’s no shortage of business opportunities,” she says. “Even now, we have lots of international clients from nearby markets like Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia.”

However, she stops short of ruling out the possibility of setting up overseas outlets in the future, noting that both vertical and horizontal expansion remain important to the company.

With many Singapore startups struggling to stay profitable in today’s economy, Ms Jean Tong advises young entrepreneurs to take calculated risks, create a strong

company culture and to never underestimate the value of hard work.

“Be yourself,” she says with a smile. “Integrity and authenticity is something that communicates with people on a very intuitive level, and that connection keeps them coming back to you.” ■

*The companies featured are tenants of Mapletree.
The articles are brought to you by*

mapletree