



LEARNING AND DISCOVERY

Celebrating 5 Years of Partnerships

Learning and Discovery – Celebrating 5 Years of Partnerships

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Edited by
James Koh

Designed & Produced by
SiliconPlus Communications Pte Ltd

First Edition 2010

Printed and bound in Singapore by International Press Softcom Limited
This book is printed on FSC-certified paper.

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CENTRE INTRODUCTION

Celebrating 5 Years of Partnerships

Started in 2005, the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance (USEA) is a collaboration between the Singapore Management University (SMU), the United Overseas Bank Limited (UOB), and more than two hundred alliance partners that include both local businesses and individuals.

USEA aims to promote the growth and development of Singapore's Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources. At the same time, it supports SMU's mission to enhance the learning experiences of SMU students in the areas of enterprise management and consulting. Past projects have focused on a range of areas, including marketing consultancy and research, business strategy and planning, human resource, and operations management.

The principal initiative of USEA is the SME Consulting Programme, where SMU students embark on business consultancy projects initiated by local enterprises. Supervised by SMU faculty or affiliates with the requisite experience and domain expertise, students with a strong academic grounding are selected to take on projects that suit their interests. Working in the programme provides these students with authentic learning experiences that bridge the gap between theory and practice – after all, many of these projects require students to collect and analyse primary data for the SME, and to develop recommendations that address the real needs of the company. Projects that are initiated are thus approved on the basis that both the SME and the students will stand to benefit from its completion.

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USEA aims to promote the growth and development of Singapore's Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources. At the same time, it supports SMU's mission to enhance the learning experiences of SMU students in the areas of enterprise management and consulting.

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The image shows the glass entrance of the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre. The glass has a large sign that reads "UOB - SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre". Inside the building, several office chairs are visible. The lighting is dim, suggesting an evening or indoor setting with artificial light.

UOB - SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre

USEA subsidises the cost of each project, made possible by donations from the alliance partners, and a matching donation by UOB of up to \$1 million. The SME Consulting Programme is indeed the first of its kind – a tripartite collaboration where a leading regional bank provides the necessary financial commitment, a world-class university makes available student and faculty resources, and successful businesses offer sponsorship and entrepreneurial experience to nurture the business community in Singapore. Since 2005, 109 projects have been completed (as at August 2010), involving 81 SMEs and 321 students. Another 25 projects will be completed by the end of 2010.

USEA also organises regular talks and seminars that cater to both SMEs and SMU students. Topics include business growth and development, the establishment of a market presence in a foreign market, and succession planning. Other networking activities include sharing sessions by entrepreneurs and workshops for SME executives.

In 2009, at the height of the global financial crisis, USEA was selected by SPRING Singapore – the government agency tasked with growing the SME sector – to spearhead the Business Advisors Programme (BAP). The programme places highly qualified and experienced Business Advisors (BAs) for a six-month period to SMEs, so that the BAs can assist the companies in scaling their businesses. At the same time, SPRING subsidises up to 70% of the stipend for each project. SPRING Singapore chose USEA as a partner because of its strong links and deep understanding of the needs of local SMEs. Since the start of the programme, USEA has assisted in placing BAs to 119 projects.

These programmes and platforms reflect the key thrusts of USEA, namely education, outreach and research, and they point to the growth of USEA from strength to strength, as it firmly establishes itself as a strong supporter and key partner of Singapore's SME community.



MESSAGE FROM

MR WEE EE CHEONG

DEPUTY CHAIRMAN & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
UNITED OVERSEAS BANK GROUP

The UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance was established in 2005, and is a tripartite alliance between UOB, SMU and successful local enterprises. It was borne out of a common objective to promote entrepreneurship and academic excellence in Singapore. To fund this cause, the community of local enterprises and UOB then raised in excess of \$3 million, with UOB contributing \$1 for every \$2 sponsored by the local business community. The monies are used to partially fund consulting projects and activities organised by the Alliance for the SME community.

In celebrating the 5th anniversary, it is an opportune time to take stock of the progress under this Alliance. Since its inception, the Alliance has completed 109 consulting projects (as at August 2010) for 81 SMEs. Some of these projects are featured within this commemorative book. SMU students, guided and advised by SMU faculty or affiliates, provide the consulting services and are exposed to real-life business scenarios. The students gain invaluable experience in the process. Local enterprises have also benefitted from transfer of knowledge and expertise through these consulting projects as well as the numerous workshops and seminars organised. We are proud of our achievements under the Alliance in promoting entrepreneurship and injecting real-life learning opportunities for the SMU students.

Going forward, the Alliance will continue to reach out to both the local enterprises and the SMU students, and leverage on its

successes to-date. With a dominant share of the SME market, UOB understands the importance of local enterprises to the Singapore economy. We also understand the challenges faced by SMEs in managing and growing their businesses, and the need for our students to be exposed to more than just academic exercises. UOB is proud to be part of this initiative, to give back to the local business community and to support education.

This Alliance would not have been possible without the generosity and foresight of several parties – SMU for their dedication to the cause; local enterprises which have supported this initiative; and members of the Alliance's Board and Executive Committee, who have contributed invaluable time and advice.

As we celebrate our 5th anniversary, I wish the Alliance ongoing success in its endeavors.





MESSAGE
FROM

PROFESSOR ARNOUD DE MEYER
PRESIDENT
SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

The establishment of the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre here at the Singapore Management University (SMU) has been an exciting and fulfilling endeavour. It was a pioneering model of tripartite collaboration where a regional bank lends financial commitment and contacts, a university makes available student and faculty resources, and local businesses provide funding and entrepreneurial experience that embody a pay-it-forward spirit to build up their smaller counterparts.

This book chronicles highlights of what the Centre has achieved, including the development of local case studies. These are the fruits of vision and tenacity.

The hallmark of the Centre's initiatives is the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Consulting Programme. It finances business projects commissioned by local enterprises, undertaken by SMU students and mentored by SMU faculty or affiliates with the resources, knowledge and network.

Over the years, it has benefitted principally two groups of people – in fact the very groups we had set out to help from the onset – the SMEs who are hungry for growth but may be resource-strapped, and the equally hungry SMU students who are thirsting for opportunities and platforms to prove themselves and apply what they have learnt in the classroom.

The Centre has helped entrepreneurs and it has also groomed entrepreneurs in the process. It has given our students a foray into consulting and into real businesses. It has also encouraged students to look into careers in the vibrant SME sector.

Universities are creators of knowledge, but more importantly, that role is only meaningful if an institution ultimately benefits society through what it does and creates. We are committed to leverage on our strong industry linkages to continue making a positive impact on the business community, while grooming Asia's next generation of business leaders.

Time flies when one is engaged meaningfully. On its 5th anniversary, I congratulate the Centre and wish it continuing relevance and success for years to come.



MESSAGE FROM

MR ANG SER KENG

CENTRE DIRECTOR
UOB-SMU ENTREPRENEURSHIP ALLIANCE CENTRE

The Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector forms the backbone of every economy. Hence, the growth and development of this sector is inextricably tied to the future of the economy. Likewise, the younger generation is the future of the country. The nurturing of young minds is critical for a country's future. The UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance (USEA) aims to serve the needs of these two beneficiaries – the community of SMEs and students.

Driving the growing influence of the centre is our SME Consulting Programme (SCP), where students from the Singapore Management University (SMU) embark on consultancy projects for local SMEs, where they apply the knowledge acquired in class to assist SMEs in solving business problems. Business owners taking part in the SCP want to learn and discover about the various aspects of their business – finance, operations, employees and customers. They understand and appreciate the importance of looking within themselves, reviewing their business practices and processes, as well as embracing a disciplined approach to problem-solving and decision-making.

Student consultants embark on projects to gain new perspectives about local businesses and industries, and to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in school to real-world issues faced by companies. This enhances their

education experience at SMU, and puts them in good stead to better serve the companies they will join upon graduation.

During the entire process of learning and discovery, both the SME and student consultants appreciate how rigorous research is able to shed light on real business problems and challenges. In order to add value to the SME and to ensure that the SME is not unduly burdened, an experienced project advisor is appointed to guide each team. In the following chapters of this book, you will be able to read stories about some of these projects.

Although the SCP is simple in concept, the operation of the programme is challenging. Mismanagement of the projects could result in an adverse impact on the brandname of the sponsors and the institutions involved. This is especially so when there are up to thirty projects in progress at any

one time. Hence, we have focused on ensuring that quality work is achieved for all projects. This is done by having a stringent set of criteria for selecting student consultants and project advisors, ensuring that the scope of the project is clearly defined, and actively managing the project throughout the process.

Besides the SCP, we also conduct complimentary workshops, talks and seminars that benefit our SMEs and students. These occur every other month and we organise around nine such events every year. The topics have been carefully selected to provide SMEs with practical skill-sets that would enhance their effectiveness in the workplace. The event also provides students with a chance to network with entrepreneurs and learn more about the various issues that SMEs face.

In response to the global financial crisis in 2009, USEA was selected by SPRING Singapore to collaborate on the Business Advisors Programme (BAP). The objective of this programme was to match displaced and highly-qualified professionals, managers, executives and technicians (known as 'Business Advisors' or 'BAs' under the BAP)

with SMEs. The BAs work with the SMEs on short-term stints, helping to grow the SMEs' business and services, while contextualising their own expertise. SPRING Singapore selected USEA as a partner for this project because we understand the needs of local SMEs. To date, we have helped to match BAs to 119 projects.

All these have been achieved through modest spending. The team at USEA ensures that the funds donated by our sponsors are used prudently while meeting the Centre's overall objectives. To date, we have spent a little over 40% of the S\$3 million that was entrusted to us.

We would not have been able to do so much in such a short space of time without our sponsors and supporters. It is therefore important for us to express our earnest gratitude to them. First, we would like to thank the current and former members of our Board of Governors and Executive Committee. They have selflessly given their invaluable time to guide and direct us in our efforts. Next, I would like to specially acknowledge the significant contributions by the various project advisors of the SCP, who have

spent invaluable time and energy in guiding and mentoring our student consultants. Last but not least, I would also like to personally thank the wonderful and stellar team at USEA, who have worked tirelessly to fulfil the meaningful objective of growing and developing both SMEs and young minds.

Moving forward, USEA will give greater attention to research. A specific area that we will be focusing on is family-owned businesses, which is of interest to our SMEs since many of them are run by families. To this end, we will be organising events, workshops, and research symposiums on developments in this area.

This book marks the 5th anniversary of USEA. As it looks back at the projects that USEA has partnered with SMEs, I also hope that it is a signal of greater things to come for the Centre.







BGC GROUP

BGC Group started out with a simple idea – that a company’s unending quest for human capital can be managed by a recruitment firm that is able to provide high-calibre talent in the shortest time possible, henceforth allowing the company to focus their energy and resources on the other important things necessary in their company’s development and advancement.

From its beginnings in 2005, *BGC Group’s* relentless dedication to client satisfaction and strategic focus has seen the company grow from strength to strength, expanding steadily to its current capacity of thirty consultants. Today, *BGC Group* is a full-fledged service recruitment and search firm with expertise in the banking & financial services, commercial, oil/gas, and infocomm sectors.



-PROJECT AIMS

The aim of this research project with *BGC* was to investigate the additional knowledge and skills required by their consultants to serve their clients, as well as to provide a clearer picture of how its current employees perceived the company. In the process, recommendations were made to increase the satisfaction and loyalty of its employees, thereby reducing staff turnover.

-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Detailed interviews with the employees were conducted and the following strengths of *BGC* were identified:

1. The strong emphasis on teamwork.
2. The open environment of the office space that encouraged a cohesive working culture.
3. The use of a performance board that encouraged employees to be highly self-motivated.

-RECOMMENDATIONS

During the course of the research, the students surfaced key organisational issues and proposed a strategy that could be implemented to address each issue. For example, a common area that many companies could focus on when they started to grow in size was establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The team embarked on a review of the company's practices to determine if SOPs were commonly utilised. In cases where they had not been adopted, the team made specific recommendations for *BGC* to include them. The review was necessary, since employees would then be clear about key processes, and how work was distributed amongst the employees. The objective was thus to ensure that SOPs were established in key areas, and to develop an IT system so that information could be properly categorised and easily retrieved when necessary.

The second area that the team focused on was the way which employees were inducted into the company. As the company was growing in size, some aspects of recruitment and induction needed to be standardised across the firm. This would ensure that new employees had a good initial impression of the company.

Another area of review was the way which the firm handled less than ideal performance by its employees. The objective of the review was to ensure that some of these policies did not trade efficiency for morale. As far as possible, some of these policies should focus on capacity-building, for example extending the probation period for new employees, or providing training on Saturdays for employees who were not able to meet their sales target.

While *BGC* had achieved tremendous success, its organisational structure had remained relatively flat, which could restrict the growth and development of its current consultants. Hence, one of the areas of review was a possible revamp of the organisational structure, so as to provide more opportunities for current consultants to take up new responsibilities and roles.

In the same vein, additional training and support for employees could not only motivate the consultants but also enhance their productivity. The former was a key ingredient for the continued attraction, motivation and retention of talent, which was very crucial in their industry. Senior consultants of the company could also advise new consultants in managing the challenges they would face when touching base with new prospects.

Since the role of the consultants was primarily weighted towards the servicing of their client, a review was conducted to determine if they were overly burdened by administrative tasks. If this were the case, providing additional administrative support or streamlining processes would help.



The project allowed us to better understand how theoretical frameworks that we studied in class could be applied to address issues faced by SMEs; yet it also highlighted the limitations of such frameworks as some of them could not be so easily translated to a real-world context.

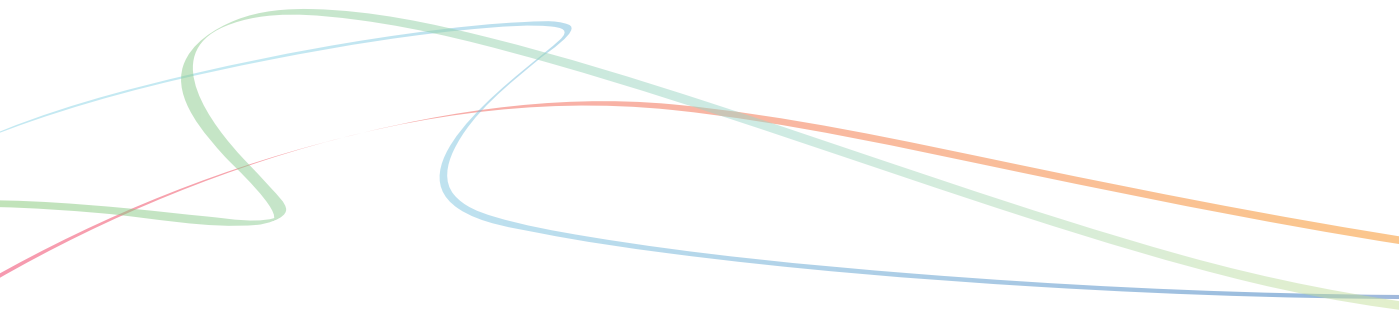


LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

The student consultants embarked on this project as they wanted to take on a more hands-on approach to learning. This proved to be the case, as according to the students, 'The project allowed us to better understand how theoretical frameworks that we studied in class could be applied to address issues faced by SMEs; yet it also highlighted the limitations of such frameworks as some of them could not be so easily translated to a real-world context.'

The initial challenge faced by the students was the difficulty in understanding how the company functioned. Given its scale, the students also faced the problem of identifying and categorising information that would be meaningful for the project. They managed to address this issue by spending more time talking to staff members of the company, as well as their project advisor.

According to their project advisor, the students were 'full of initiative and were very proactive'. The project advisor also helped the students understand what they should focus on for the project, and how to go about conducting their research so that they could develop meaningful recommendations for *BGC*.





The students were responsible and were very dedicated to this project. Even though they had limited work experience, they did a tremendous job.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

The company was pleased with the recommendations made by the student consultants. 'The students were responsible and were very dedicated to this project. Even though they had limited work experience, they did a tremendous job,' Mr Tristan Chew, Managing Director of *BGC* noted.

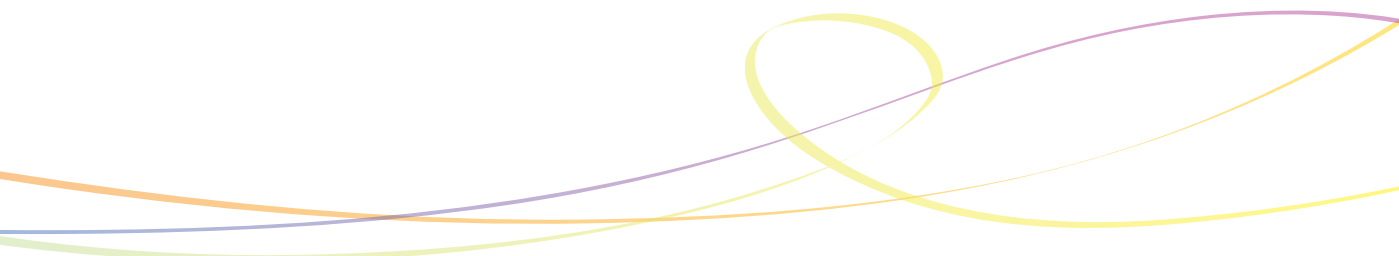
Given the recommendations made by the student consultants, the company hired a Human Resource Manager who has since developed an induction and orientation programme for new employees. The company has also started to send its managers and key personnel to workshops conducted by various government-approved training providers.

Project Advisor: **Dr Rani Tan**

Student
Consultants: **Lewis Liu Zhong Kang**
Bachelor of Business Management

Claire Ong Yi-lin
Bachelor of Social Science

Don Tan Er Wayn
Bachelor of Science (IS Management)



DYNAFORCE

The *Dynaforce* group is a leader in the supply of fitness and wellness products and services in South East Asia. It actively promotes a lifestyle focused on physical exercise and rejuvenation, as per its motto 'Wellness in Motion'. It aims to help its customers achieve a holistic 'body-mind-spirit' balance in life.

Since its founding in 1989, the company has grown regionally, with offices in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, which are staffed by over 100 dedicated professionals. Its main business is the distribution of exclusive fitness equipment from Technogym and spa equipment from Starpool to top hotels, residences, clubs, universities and high net-worth individuals. It has designed, equipped and managed wellness centres and clubs for over 20 years. *Dynaforce* has also provided wellness service and programmes to the community – it is a leading service provider for the Health Promotion Board in promoting workplace health, and offers active ageing and family fitness programmes in the community heartlands in collaboration with the Council of Third Age and NTUC Eldercare.



PROJECT AIMS

In March 2010, *Dynaforce* opened an inter-generational fitness club (called *Famili Club*) that aimed to bring together the three generations of a family through exercise. This research project was a branding exercise that focused on helping the company re-brand its 'Famili Club' to become 'Famili First', while charting the possible direction that the fitness club could take as part of the re-branding exercise.

-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

In order to better understand the market potential of the company, the business concepts that grounded the project, as well as the needs of the customers, the students conducted research via the following three platforms:

1. Analysis of membership database for demographic data, in particular the age and gender of the members.
2. Monitoring of daily traffic at *Famili Club* over three months, from March to May 2010.
3. Interviewing members of the club and observing fitness classes in action at *Famili Club* in May 2010.

Three key findings were identified based on the research. Firstly, while the *Famili Club* targeted a broad spectrum of ages, each age group had its own unique combination of needs, interests and abilities. To build a strong brand, *Dynaforce* should therefore identify a more accurate profile for each of the customer segments. In this way, it would be able to tailor its products and services to better meet the needs of each particular age group. The second finding was that classes that were tailored to specific age segments were popular among many members. In fact, few members visited the club to exercise on their own. Membership numbers were also affected by the location of the *Famili Club*, which was not located near any MRT or LRT station. This was the third issue – how the accessibility of the club's location was critical in helping the club increase its membership.

-RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made by the students were based on the following three criteria: one, that these recommendations should be aligned with *Dynaforce's* vision of establishing an inter-generational fitness club; two, that the brand should be tailored to meet the needs, interests and abilities of the selected segments of *Dynaforce's* customers; three, that the recommendations should leverage on *Dynaforce's* strengths as a leader in the supply of fitness and wellness products and services.



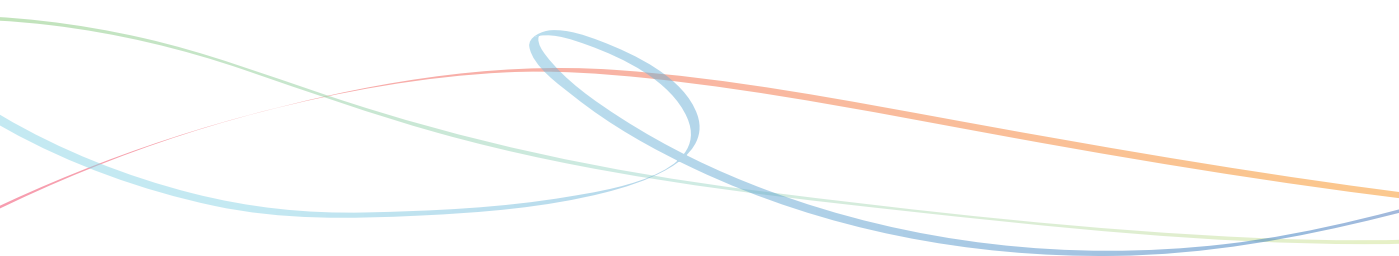
Our deepest sense of satisfaction in completing the project was seeing the smile on Mr Jimmie Lee's face when we presented our final recommendations to him. He was so impressed with our work that he gave each of us a written testimonial! That was definitely worth more than getting an A+ for our school projects!



The key recommendation was that *Famili First* should target two generations at one time, rather than all three generations. Given the diversity of the needs and interests of all three target segments, concentrating on two age groups would enable *Famili First* to capitalise on the common ground between two segments and therefore fulfil the needs of its customers in a more focused and meaningful way. Only after *Famili First* was able to strongly establish its brand as an inter-generational fitness club, could it then explore expanding its reach to the other age group.

Based on the criteria of physical ability, availability of time and bonding opportunities, the student group recommended that parents and their sons/daughters should be the two generations that *Famili First* should target. In particular, the son/daughter should be in their 20s, as it was during this period that the physical fitness level of both parents and their children would be relatively similar. Both groups would also be free during the evening, after work or school. In terms of opportunities to bond, as the sons/daughters were now mature adults, the generation gap would be much easier to bridge.

At the same time, in order to deliver on its brand promise, it was proposed that *Famili First* should continue to develop attractive and engaging classes to bring in new members and sustain regular traffic. Moreover, the fitness centre should consider introducing gender-based classes, so that these classes could be tailored to address the different motivations and needs of women and men. The club should also be in an accessible location, possibly close to a MRT or LRT station, bus interchange or shopping mall, so that it could extend its market reach. At the same time, it was suggested that staff members and trainers of the club should represent and embody the brand promise of *Famili First*. More should also be done to reach out to the wider community through promotional campaigns and events, by collaborating with schools, community centres and religious organisations. In this way, *Famili First* would be able to promote its wellness services, as well as attract new members.



LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

What struck the students when they first took on this project to develop a brand strategy for *Famili First* was how the company positioned itself as an inter-generational fitness club. But what excited them even more was the opportunity to gain experience in the field of consulting. As they said, 'Most of our school projects in SMU involve using secondary data and information in class. We now had the chance to conduct original research of our own, apply the requisite technical skills, and help a SME address a real-world problem.'

The group did face a number of challenges in the course of their research. Their first recommendation of branding *Famili First* as a lifestyle choice was not well-received by *Dynaforce* as this was not aligned to the company's vision. But as the students said, 'The inputs from Mr Jimmie Lee, the chairman of *Dynaforce*, as well as his colleagues, were very helpful as they allowed us to develop a more succinct brand strategy for them.'

Mr Jorg Dietzel, the project advisor, also provided guidance to the students with his vast experience in branding and business consultancy. He equipped them with the necessary skills and knowledge, so that they were empowered to take greater ownership of the project, as well as to better appreciate the significance of their task.

At the end of the project, the students gained an insight into the challenges faced by SMEs. 'We realised that maintaining the operations of a SME is never easy. By interacting with various members of the company, we had the chance to understand the various functions of each department. But perhaps our deepest sense of satisfaction in completing the project was seeing the smile on Mr Jimmie Lee's face when we presented our final recommendations to him. He was so impressed with our work that he gave each of us a written testimonial! That was definitely worth more than getting an A+ for our school projects!'



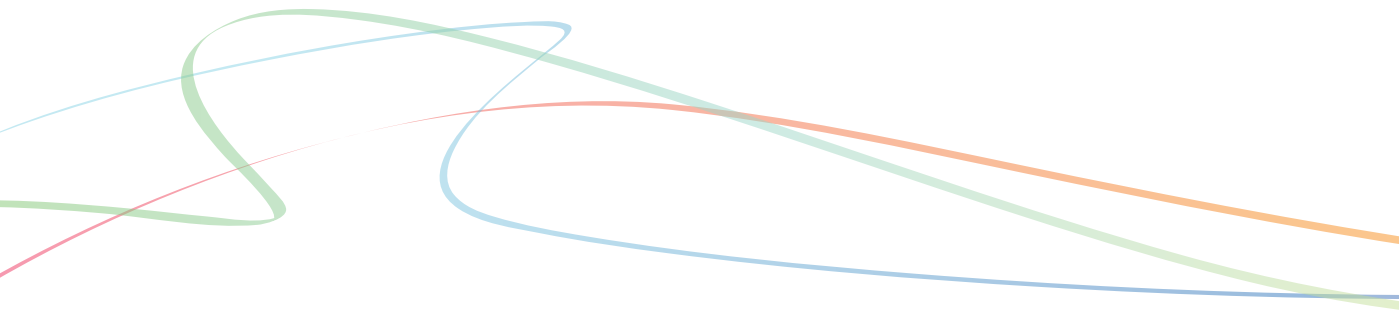
Their research and field work were very detailed and they showed a great understanding of our needs and our core business. In fact, they went above and beyond the call of duty and also made recommendations on what we should offer to our customers and how to execute the programmes. It was clear that the team was passionate about this project.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

According to *Dynaforce*, the students involved in the project were driven, dynamic and committed to the project. 'Their research and field work were very detailed and they showed a great understanding of our needs and our core business. In fact, they went above and beyond the call of duty and also made recommendations on what we should offer to our customers and how to execute these programmes. It was clear that the team was passionate about this project. It was also obvious that the project was something they could relate to and they believed in the mission of our three-generation club,' said the company.

Dynaforce found the recommendations useful, given the students' extensive use of demographic statistics and other research material to support their findings. It has since adopted a number of their recommendations for their second club at Dakota, and are now monitoring whether these changes made to the second club would make this second club more successful than their first club at Punggol South. According to the company, *Dynaforce* has deliberately 'not changed the way we operate in the first club for now, so as to better assess the impact of the recommendations on the second club. It is early days yet, but we are very optimistic, given that our own team was convinced by the recommendations made by the students.'

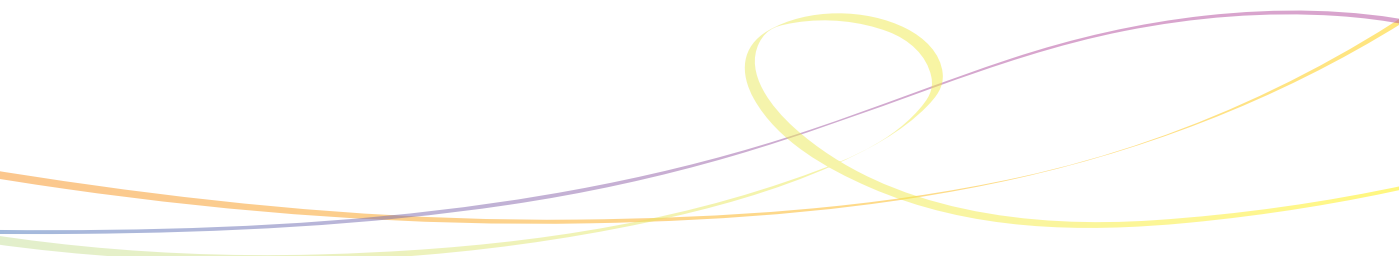


Project Advisor: **Mr Jorg Dietzel**

Student **Lee Cher Han**
Consultants: *Bachelor of Business Management &
Bachelor of Social Science*

Jiang Keshi
*Bachelor of Business Management &
Bachelor of Social Science*

Kwok Kin Fei
*Bachelor of Business Management &
Bachelor of Accountancy*







ECHO BRANDS

Echo Brands is dedicated to the marketing, retailing and distribution of designer environmentally friendly (or 'eco') brands. It brings in eco-iconic products with real eco-benefits for eco-conscious consumers who desire well-designed and well-made products. These products help consumers make a bold and positive statement about themselves and their eco-status. The goal of *Echo Brands* is to be the biggest and most preferred retailer and distributor of designer eco-brands in Asia.



PROJECT AIMS

The research project with *Echo Brands* had two broad aims. Firstly, it was to understand consumer sentiments regarding eco-fashion, in particular consumers who were in the 16 to 29 age group. Secondly, it was to determine whether it was viable for the company to use social marketing to reach out to its customers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

To obtain qualitative research data, two focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 11 people. During these sessions, a number of key areas were touched on, including online shopping habits, perceived influence of bloggers and social media on lifestyle choices, and attitudes to eco-friendly products.

Some of the key findings from the qualitative data were as follows:

1. Participants were more likely to browse online for fashion ideas rather than actually purchase clothing items. This was due in part to complicated transaction procedures, possible shipment failure, and the difficulty of ascertaining whether the size of the clothes purchased online would actually be suitable.
2. A greater importance was placed on personal style rather than on the need to follow fashion trends. To this end, bloggers and celebrities had no influence on the participants.

3. Whether a product was environmentally friendly was not a necessity or a consideration for the participants. As such, participants were not willing to pay a premium for products that were eco-friendly.

Quantitative data was collected via an online survey with 208 participants. The data helped the students zoom in on online shopping behaviours and buying patterns, attitudes towards eco-friendly apparel, and website preferences. Some of the key findings from the quantitative data were as follows:

1. A large number of participants had not purchased clothing items online before.
2. The most powerful factor that influenced the buying behaviour of participants was word-of-mouth, followed by familiarity with the brand, and whether the item was featured in a fashion magazine or the newspaper.
3. Whether a clothing item was environmentally friendly was a minor consideration for a number of the participants.
4. In terms of the features of a website that sold clothes, the top three factors that participants looked out for when visiting such a website were the ease of navigation, how quickly the website loaded, and whether users were provided with a 360-degree perspective of the clothing items.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on their research findings, the students made a number of recommendations. The first was that *Echo Brands* should consolidate its efforts in its physical retail shop, given that online shopping was still not a widespread practice in Singapore.

However, *Echo Brands* should still leverage on online platforms, in particular social media networks such as *Facebook*, so that it could extend its market reach. This could also include the development of its own iPhone application. The company's website should also be easy to navigate, quick to upload, and should facilitate viewing of its products by users from a 360-degree perspective.

Echo Brands could also consider positioning its clothing line as well-made and well-designed fashion products, and should not emphasise the eco-friendly aspect of the apparel. At the same time, the price of clothing items should not be lowered; student discounts should also not be provided. This would ensure that the perceived prestige value of these items would be maintained.



Working as a student consultant for a SME is a great intermediate step for us to become an employee or entrepreneur. With a better understanding of how a business operates, we are more equipped to handle the expectations and pressures we face in the future when we start working.



The marketing of these products could also be more targeted, for example by focusing on individuals in the art industry or local art schools who would be able to better appreciate the products of *Echo Brands*. Another way would be to advertise its clothing line via related events and programmes. In this way, *Echo Brands* would be able to leverage on these platforms to extend its market reach to individuals who would be more inclined to purchase clothing items sold by the company.

LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS


This project enabled the students to learn more about the fashion industry, while honing their consultancy skills. Given that they were helping *Echo Brands* address a real concern that it was facing, the students felt a deep sense of responsibility. As they said, 'The realisation that our research and recommendations may have a significant impact on a real business entity pushed us to complete this project as thoroughly as we could and to the best of our ability.'

Along the way, the students did face a number of challenges. One set of challenges was more prosaic. For instance, the students found it difficult to meet up due to conflicting timetables. To address this, flexibility and initiative became a hallmark of the group dynamics. 'Meetings were kept to a minimum and a lot of discussions were conducted over emails or through a phone call. Work was evenly shared among us in totality but in terms of peak periods, it was unevenly distributed during the course of the project, as this was dependent on our individual schedules,' said the students.

Another set of challenges was based on the project itself. The group had difficulties getting participants for the focus group discussions, as they were targeting varsity students at a time when exams and project deadlines were looming. It took the group a while to secure the required number of participants but they managed to do so in the end.

The project mentor of the group was also the SME owner – Mr Terence Yow. The students were grateful to Mr Yow for his expertise and guidance, and not only just for the project in particular. He readily shared with them tips on how to conduct themselves during a job interview, and how to manage their expectations when they started their first job. The students were also able to discuss with Mr Yow the applicability of certain theories that they had learnt in class.

The students were glad to have been part of this project. 'Working as a student consultant for a SME is a great intermediate step for us to become an employee or entrepreneur. With a better understanding of how a business operates, we are more equipped to handle the expectations and pressures we face in the future when we start working.'





I was very happy that the students had the skills and knowledge to design, execute and analyse both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the project. The good sale figures since our shop opened at Wheelock Place is testament to the value of this project.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

Echo Brands was very appreciative of the students' efforts. According to Mr Yow, 'Not only did I get great consumer feedback, insights and analysis of the new business segment I was going into, the consulting team also managed to complete the project well within the various deadlines given. This meant I had more time to use the findings to develop even clearer strategies for my business and to put them into action.'

The company found the findings of the project extremely helpful. One of the major insights that emerged was that having an online business and using social network marketing to advertise its products would at best be a supporting element of the business of *Echo Brands*. As a result, the company started to shift a lot more of its focus and resources towards setting up a physical retail shop at Wheelock Place.

The other major insight was that local consumers were not eco-conscious. Whether a fashion product was eco-friendly or not was not a key purchase consideration for many people. Based on this finding, the company focused on design and quality in the way they marketed their products, rather than on the environmentally-friendly aspect of the clothing items.

The students and their recommendations impressed *Echo Brands*. 'I was very happy that the students had the skills and knowledge to design, execute and analyse both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the project. The good sale figures since our shop opened at Wheelock Place is testament to the value of this project,' says Mr Yow.

Project Advisor: **Mr Terence Yow**

Student
Consultants: **Ethan Chia Hong Sheng**
*Bachelor of Science (Economics) &
Bachelor of Business Management*

Chelsea Lim Hui Ying
Bachelor of Business Management

Claressa Wong Lifang
*Bachelor of Business Management &
Bachelor of Science (Economics)*

ELIXIR TECHNOLOGY

Elixir Technology provides an integrated business intelligence suite built on cloud-based architecture for data ETL, reporting, dashboard, and scheduling, with ad-hoc facility for end-user self-serviced business intelligence. With its unified architecture and open interoperability on Service Oriented Architecture (SOA) with REST APIs, *Elixir Technology's* software is easy to install, cost-effective and able to inter-operate with other applications.

With over 800 customers across 60 countries and represented by a network of partners worldwide, *Elixir Technology* provides a comprehensive business intelligence solution that is ready to power the next-generation of business analytics applications.



-PROJECT AIMS

The research project with *Elixir Technology* was to assist the company in producing a private placement prospectus to raise capital from investors. This prospectus would highlight the product strength and unique value proposition of *Elixir Technology*, identify the company's strategic partnerships and key clientele, and outline growth strategies and specific campaigns targeted at international expansion.

-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The students embarked on the project by first analysing the business intelligence industry both locally and globally as well as the prospects of the industry. This enabled them to obtain a contextual understanding of the products and services that *Elixir Technology* sells and provides.

The next step saw the students familiarising themselves with *Elixir Technology*. They covered all aspects of the company, including the product line, key features of the products, how the company positioned itself, its company management, its strategies for growth, and its plans for international expansion. They also worked with the company to evaluate the economic viability of the company in terms of its long terms strategies.

After consolidating all the inputs that they had gathered, the students started drafting the prospectus, which went through a number of rounds of fine-tuning. Amendments were made to the draft accordingly, and the final prospectus was presented to *Elixir Technology*.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The final prospectus included the following components: (1) an overview of *Elixir Technology*, including its vision and mission, its corporate history and its management and organisation structure; (2) the business model of the company, including its signature products and services, and its unique value proposition; (3) the company's strategic partnerships and key clientele; (4) the company's growth strategies, including the emerging Software as a Service (SaaS) market, vertical solution space, and international expansion; (5) the specific use of private placement proceeds, as articulated via four campaigns; (6) the company's financial forecast, in particular its profit and loss statement, its balance sheet, its cash flow statement, and its market sizing.

Of note, the students gave details of the four campaigns that were part of the specific use of the private placement proceeds. This included the manpower and operational costs for each campaign. The first campaign was the establishment of technical and marketing presence in the United States (US) where its existing partners were located. Thus, it would leverage on existing collaborations with other companies to penetrate the US market.

The second campaign, which would complement the first, was to have an enhanced web presence in the US. *Elixir Technology* could develop a more consistent and distinct brand image to differentiate itself from its competitors, and win over new customers. One way to do this was to revamp and re-launch their corporate website to provide potential clients an enhanced user experience.





A project advisor, who had a wealth of experience in accounting and finance consultancy, guided the students in the project. While he helped them to understand the workings of a private placement, and showed them how to structure and put together a comprehensive prospectus to target the correct investors, he was also impressed by how resourceful and well-informed the students were.



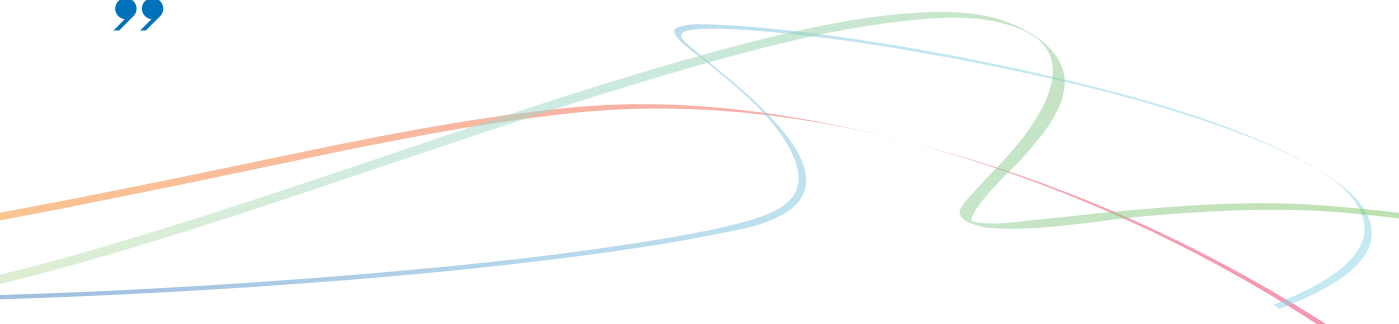
The third campaign was to set up an overseas marketing office in another city in Asia. This would allow it to have greater proximity to the decision-making entities and regulatory agencies of that particular country, thereby building strong connections with government officials for possible business opportunities. This would also be the company's first step towards establishing geographical coverage in that country. *Elixir Technology* would also be able to collaborate with other Singapore companies and partners with a strong existing presence in that part of Asia.

The final campaign was the setting up of a research and development office in China. This would help to support *Elixir Technology's* growing customer base in China with the required technical infrastructure. The choice of the city would depend on its proximity to major markets in China.

LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

When the students involved first signed up for the project, they were excited to see whether they could apply what they had learnt in class to good use. As they mentioned, 'We faced real-life issues that had to be resolved in ways that were unique to the company. The project allowed us to appreciate this, something that we would not have been able to do if we simply relied on our textbooks.'

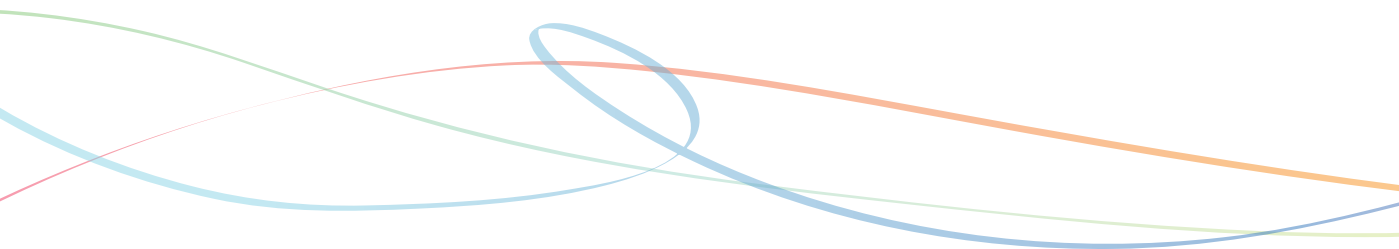
The students were also eager to work with *Elixir Technology*, and to help the company expand into various international markets. 'As student consultants, we hoped that our contributions could have a positive impact and raise the platform for local SMEs to compete internationally. Throughout the project, we were thrilled to participate in the strategic planning of the company's expansion efforts, and that motivated us to do our best,' said the students.



The group also faced a number of challenges during the course of the project, one of which was the sourcing for relevant markets despite their best efforts. As *Elixir Technology* was dealing with a specialised software programme in the IT industry, and as the programme itself was relatively new at that point in time, data was not readily available, both locally and internationally. What the students learnt was that this was one of the common constraints faced by consultants. As they pointed out, 'The best way to resolve it was to make 'guesstimates' or proxies that were sufficient to gauge the market, which were in turn based on solid assumptions and logical justifications. This was not easy, as compared to our school projects which often used textbook scenarios where the information to be sourced was readily available.'

Yet working on the project was extremely rewarding for the students. They had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the business intelligence sector, an industry that was seldom covered in the case studies they studied during lessons. As the students highlighted, 'Not only did our team gain useful knowledge in that particular sector, the project also made us realise that SMEs were – more often than not – in a state of flux, as a result of competition from local and regional companies.'

A project advisor, who had a wealth of experience in accounting and finance consultancy, guided the students in the project. While he helped them to understand the workings of a private placement, and showed them how to structure and put together a comprehensive prospectus to target the correct investors, he was also impressed by how resourceful and well-informed the students were.





The research methodology undertaken by the students has certainly contributed to the usefulness of the results produced. We will now adopt a similar methodology when we adapt the prospectus for target audiences.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

Elixir Technology was happy with the outcomes of the project, in particular the groundwork that was done by the students for the prospectus, and the positioning and valuation of their products. While the prospectus was not completely ready to be sent out to potential investors, the company acknowledged that only a very seasoned investment adviser would have been able to provide such an insightful prospectus.

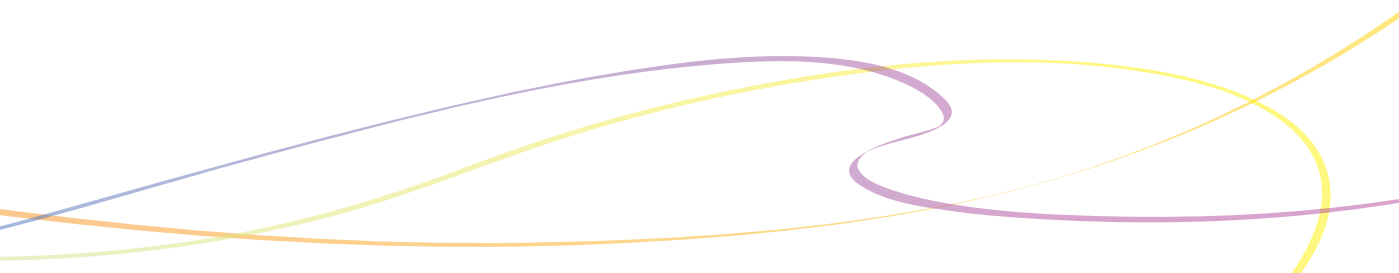
The student-produced prospectus is currently used by the company as a base material to initiate discussions with prospective investors. While no successful conclusions have been made as yet, the company is pleased that the prospectus has helped to generate some interest during the on-going discussions. As the company highlighted, 'The research methodology undertaken by the students has certainly contributed to the usefulness of the results produced. We will now adopt a similar methodology when we adapt the prospectus for target audiences.'

Project Advisor: **Mr Tan Tiong Gee**

Student
Consultants: **Clemence Yeo Ming Rui**
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

Wang Li Jun
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

Eileen Chung Yee Cheng
Bachelor of Science (Economics)







HOME-FIX

Home-Fix is a spinoff of a mom-and-pop-store that grew to become a home improvement store. It opened its first store at Siglap Centre 16 years ago, where it sold D.I.Y. products in air-conditioned comfort. This also marked the transition of a family-owned enterprise into a modern store.

With a high demand for D.I.Y. products from expatriates, the decision was made to open a second store in Tanglin Mall, a prime location for expatriates in Singapore. *Home-Fix* has since expanded to 21 outlets in Singapore, mostly within the heartlands, with its flagship at Marina Square. It has now evolved to become a home improvement and lifestyle centre, with seven stores in Malaysia and two in Indonesia.




PROJECT AIMS

The research project aimed to help *Home-Fix* develop a better understanding of its customers, obtain feedback from them, as well as collect secondary data on precinct information, including household types and T.O.P dates for new HDB and private property developments.

The students were thus tasked to conduct market research that would help the company better understand its business prospects in an emerging customer segment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The market research encompassed three dimensions: secondary, exploratory, and descriptive. This design provided both qualitative as well as quantitative information that enabled the student consultants to fulfil their research objectives.



Secondary research was carried out to provide *Home-Fix* with overall information about HDB flats in Singapore, thereby providing the company with a clearer picture as to how HDB flats were distributed in the country. The research methodology of identifying precincts with new units was also established. *Home-Fix* could thus continue to use this methodology in the future to identify potential precinct areas.

Face-to-face interviews were part of the exploratory research. The aim was to interview customers at a more personal level and find out about their perceptions and attitudes towards the D.I.Y. and home improvement business.

As part of the descriptive research, an online survey was conducted to identify consumer attitudes, and hence fine-tune the marketing approach of the company by understanding the various effective touch points.

Dimensions related to home improvement and D.I.Y. (such as personal attributes, physical store experience, D.I.Y. tendency, product, shopping preferences and family decision-making) were used to attain a holistic view of customers. By analysing these constructs against a set of demographic profiles (such as income, age, education, and household type), several customer segments could be established.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the survey findings and analysis, the student consultants were able to recommend to *Home-Fix* the online tools that could be used to pin-point new and existing private property developments, and the corresponding T.O.P dates for these new developments.

The face-to-face interviews and online surveys helped to identify new market segments for *Home-Fix* to tap on. This in turn would help create new business opportunities for the company. At the same time, the responses suggested that the female population was a growing segment in the home improvement business, as women started to take a more personal interest in do-it-yourself issues.

With a better knowledge about customers' psychographics, *Home-Fix* could fine-tune its marketing strategy and touch-points based on customers' attitudes and perceptions toward D.I.Y., shopping preferences, and pricing and product mixes.



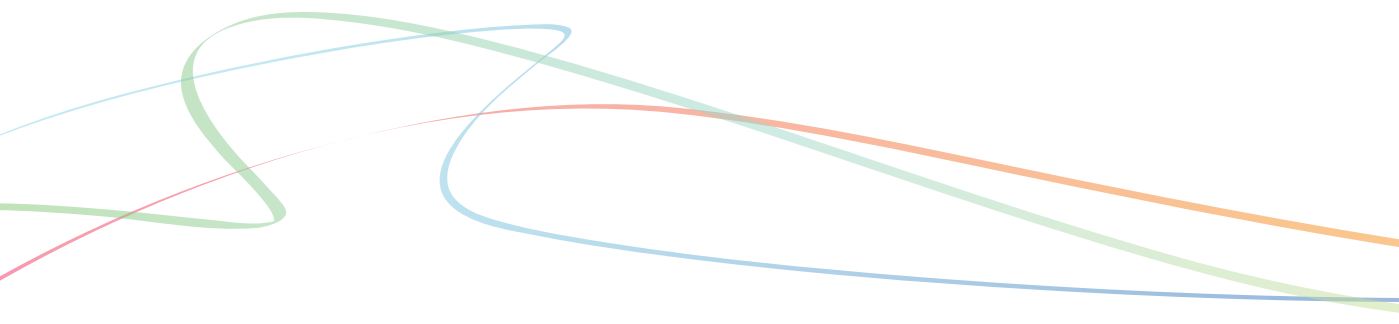
In particular, they touched base with the Managing Director of *Home-Fix* frequently, so as to better understand his vision of the company's future growth. In the process, the students gained insights into the mind of a successful entrepreneur – what it took to develop a start-up company, and the challenges he faced in expanding his business.



LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

Working on the *Home-Fix* project allowed the students to better identify the company's needs and to ensure that the key deliverables met the project's objectives. Throughout the project, the student consultants liaised closely with the company's senior management. In particular, they touched base with the Managing Director of *Home-Fix* frequently, so as to better understand his vision of the company's future growth. In the process, the students gained insights into the mind of a successful entrepreneur – what it took to develop a start-up company, and the challenges he faced in expanding his business.

In addition, the students applied the theories and concepts taught in lessons to a real-life project. They also had to be resourceful when seeking primary and secondary information for the project. It was tremendously gratifying for the students to know that *Home-Fix* valued the contributions made by them.





Specifically, the students' market research findings allowed *Home-Fix* to independently challenge and validate their own internal assessments. The students were disciplined and rigorous in researching and analysing the company's markets and the various customer segments.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

Home-Fix was very pleased with the student team. According to the company, the student consultants were keen and bright, and they brought a high degree of professionalism to the research they conducted.

As external researchers, the students were able to objectively challenge *Home-Fix's* assumptions about some of their business practices. This in turn made the company reassess some of their current processes.

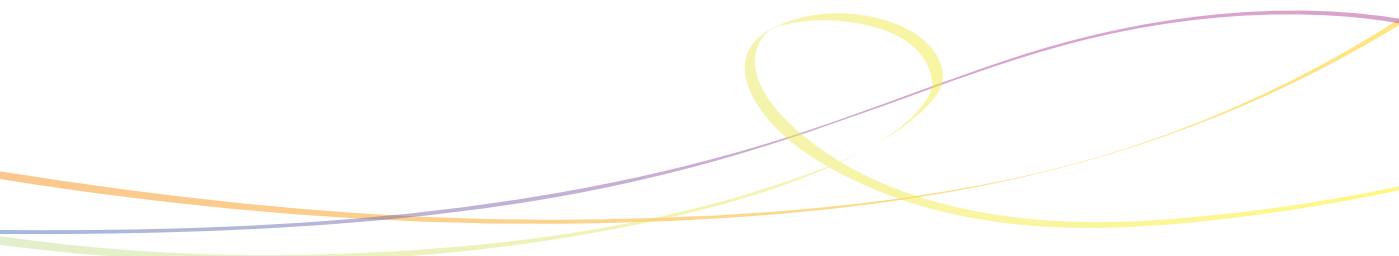
Home-Fix is currently making use of the findings from the students' market research to support their expansion plans. The students were disciplined and rigorous in researching and analysing the company's markets and the various customer segments. Specifically, the students' market research findings allowed *Home-Fix* to independently challenge and validate their own internal assessments. For example, in planning for the expansion of the *Home-Fix* retail chain, the company tried to strike a balance between responding to the push from landlords or developers to take up retail space at a specific location, and the company's own set of priorities as to where *Home-Fix* needed new stores to be located. The work done by the students thus helped the company prioritise where these new stores would be set up.

Project Advisor: **Ms Regina Chow**

Student
Consultants: **Hong Huazheng**
Bachelor of Business Management

Lionel Ng Joo Chye
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

Andrew Zhan Jinghe
Bachelor of Business Management



SEAGIFT

Seagift sells processed, 'ready-to-cook' frozen seafood to restaurants, caterers, wholesalers and supermarkets in Singapore. Its products cater to those who desire speed and convenience in the kitchen, while not sacrificing on taste and value. Dining establishments that buy *Seagift* products find that they are able to trim preparation time and labour costs, as the food can be cooked without defrosting, and they are presented in portions that are ready-to-serve – no cutting or chopping is necessary. All of this is achieved through the company's research and development initiatives, as well as extensive testing on the products.

Started in 1993 under the name, Finechem, the company used to trade in textile chemicals – a section of the business that the owners have since relinquished in favour of frozen foods.




PROJECT AIMS

Traditionally a business-to-business (B2B) company, *Seagift* made its foray into the consumer market in late 2006 through supermarket distribution channels. Since then, the company has been drumming up awareness for its products. Moving forward, however, they would like to enhance consumers' perception of its products, through branding and sales promotions. In this way, customers would be able to easily recall and identify *Seagift* products at the store. They would also like to improve *Seagift's* market position within the frozen seafood industry.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The project was divided into two phases. In the first phase, student consultants were tasked to assist with the brand positioning of *Seagift's* products, which included a survey of customers at major supermarkets. Based on the survey results, the students moved into the second phase, where they were provided with a budget to execute their recommendations



based on the first phase of the project. This included helping to organise and man the booth at a major food exhibition, as well as coming up with a marketing proposal that would address the brand identity and positioning of the company's products. They also recommended activities that would help the brand stay ahead of its competitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To make the brand more distinctive, the students proposed the use of mascots – characters that would embody what *Seagift* stood for, and to do it in a way that customers could easily understand. These mascots would put a 'face' to the company, the students argued, and a 'face' was far easier to identify in a crowded marketplace, compared to the use of words only. To illustrate what the mascots could potentially look like, the students enlisted the help of design students from one of the local design colleges to put together a range of art concepts.

Beyond merely placing its mascots on product packages, the students thought it might be useful to generate some 'hype' around the new brand identity, so that people may begin to associate positively with the brand. To do this, they proposed that the mascot could be printed on t-shirts, balloons and key chains that would be given away at events and food fairs. *Seagift* would thus be able to attract attention away from competitor brands and to arouse the interest of new potential customers. However, they cautioned that forging a strong association between the brand and the mascot would take time, so the marketing efforts had to be sustained for a long period. For future events, the students suggested that *Seagift* could produce other brand souvenirs, like plush toys and playing cards, to keep the brand alive in the minds of customers.

The next challenge of building up a brand was to ensure that the message stayed clear and consistent amid the flurry of marketing activities. This was where it may be better to have fewer activities, and to conduct these activities in a focused manner. Take, for example, the food fairs where *Seagift* often took part as a vendor. There, the products presented to consumers were versatile enough to be used across multiple cuisines. The students suggested that this might have a negative effect on consumers, as they may perceive versatility with inferiority – a product that served too many functions might not serve any one particularly well. Additionally, a confusing image would result when consumers were presented with too many options. The students thus recommended that *Seagift* stick with one image at every event, and to keep repeating the same image.

“
Students were given an opportunity to put their recommendations to the test, by organising an exhibition for the company. This was one of the highlights of the project.
”

As a frozen foods producer, *Seagift* participated in many food fairs and events, where they met up with wholesalers and buyers from restaurants and other food and beverage establishments. Some of these events were consumer-oriented as well. All in all, it was at these events that sales leads would be secured, and they thus served as one of the most important sales avenues for the company. It was therefore imperative that *Seagift* placed its best foot forward at such conventions. Here, the students proposed that the company incorporated a walk-through audit. This, they said, would allow the company to see and experience the brand from the eyes of a potential customer. Such an audit would involve surveying the customers, soliciting feedback, and then setting event performance benchmarks (e.g. waiting time at the queue).

To top off their marketing proposal, the students sourced for business contacts that *Seagift* could use, e.g. designers, t-shirt companies, balloon-printing companies, and so on. Price estimates were presented from quotations offered by these contacts, along with company names and contact details.

LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

The project provided students with a unique opportunity to gain insights into the frozen food industry. Besides working on the project, students were given an opportunity to put their recommendations to the test, by organising an exhibition for the company. This was one of the highlights of the project. Even though the team did not have the expertise when it came to designing the mascots, they helped to source for student designers who were able to provide mascot designs on a cost-effective basis.



They were happy that the students offered new perspectives on the business' strengths and weaknesses.

'Our expectations were more than met,' they concluded.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

Seagift entered into this project with USEA with low expectations. 'As the consultants were students, we, frankly, didn't expect much,' they said. However, when they saw the proposal and presentation, they were impressed by the amount of research and thought that went into the recommendations. More importantly, these recommendations helped to confirm some of the concerns that *Seagift* managers had about their consumer market for some time.

Seagift was also quite taken with some of the mascot designs presented. The graphics now appear on the company's product packaging and on the corporate calendar. 'The inclusion of the mascots on our products helped to increase sales,' said Mr Lee.

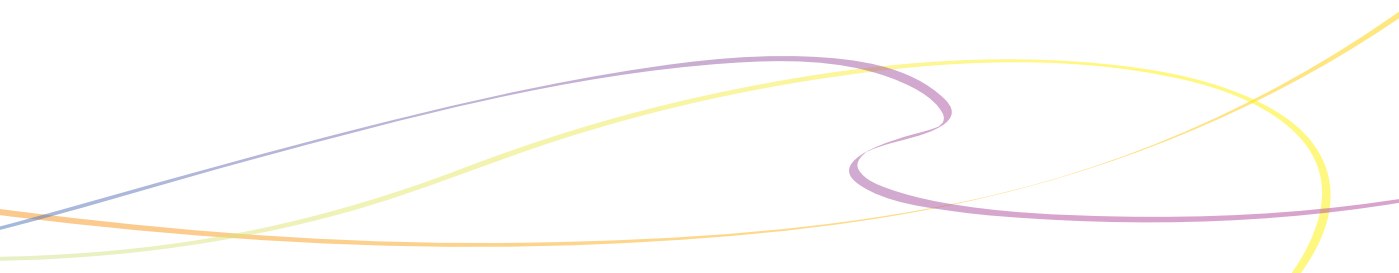
Seagift has taken up the students' suggestion of building up 'hype' for their products as well, and so they now give away free samples of their food as part of their promotional efforts at food fairs. Finally, they were happy that the students offered new perspectives on the business' strengths and weaknesses. 'Our expectations were more than met,' they concluded.

Project Advisor: **Dr Ben Chan**

Student
Consultants: **Foo Wen Xiang Kieran**
Bachelor of Science (IS Management)

Han Ping Ping
Bachelor of Business Management

Ng Wei Lin Allison
Bachelor of Business Management







KINDERWORLD EDUCATION GROUP

Since 1986, *KinderWorld* Education Group has been offering high-quality international education in Asia under its two education brands – Singapore International School (SIS) and *KinderWorld* International Kindergarten. Its unique integration of international curricula enhances the learning experience of its students and provides them with the essential skills required for a technology-driven and globalised world.

As part of its vision to provide continued education for its students to further their education beyond high school, *KinderWorld* Education Group intends to eventually set up an International University in Vietnam. In line with this vision, a new 'Pegasus UniCollege' will kick off in Hanoi in early 2011, providing a vital and timely development in the company's education endeavour.



PROJECT AIMS

The aim of the project was to conduct a brand audit of *KinderWorld Vietnam*, by assessing its current brand position and brand perception as viewed by its stakeholders – the management, teaching staff, parents and students.

Both tangible and intangible brand components were evaluated to ascertain and measure the key drivers of consumer decision-making and satisfaction. By conducting surveys with key stakeholders, this project would help the company determine whether the *KinderWorld* brand in Vietnam was perceived in a consistent way for both the internal and external stakeholders of the company.

This project was USEA's inaugural overseas project. To promote cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary exchange and learning, a team of three Vietnamese students with three Singaporean students was assembled for this project. The language capability of the Vietnamese students was essential in the execution of the project. Additionally, their home-ground familiarity and networks also helped to speed up the work and contributed greatly to the project.



-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The student consultants started the brand audit by designing survey questionnaires for staff, parents and students, in English and Vietnamese. The comprehensive surveys covered information on school choice, brand recognition and specific areas of interest, including teaching staff, curriculum, brand image and school facilities.

An on-site execution of the survey was conducted in Vietnam in October 2009. In Hanoi, 60 parents, 32 staff and 33 students were surveyed at two *KinderWorld* schools and at the corporate office. In Ho Chi Minh City, 24 parents, 18 staff and 18 students were surveyed at four schools. Survey methods used were face-to-face interviews, emails and telephone calls.

The final part of the project saw the students collating the results of the survey and analysing the survey findings.

-RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the results of the survey, the *KinderWorld* brand was associated with the provision of quality education for students. This was done within an international environment, with the use of progressive and modern teaching strategies. A number of stakeholders also linked the brand to the Singapore education system, which increased its reputation accordingly.

However, one of the limitations of the *KinderWorld* brand was that stakeholders perceived the use of the word 'kinder' in the company's name as confusing and inconsistent. For instance, the word gave the impression that the *KinderWorld* managed kindergartens, while in actuality, the company also provided education at the primary and high school levels. Some of the stakeholders also felt that the brand – to a certain extent – had become too impersonal and business-oriented; others felt that the brand had not differentiated itself enough from its competitors.

From the survey findings, staff interaction and attentiveness to students were ranked the highest. The school curriculum was rated well, especially in the use of interesting class materials. The brand logo and campus location were also identified to be the best performing attributes of the *KinderWorld* brand.

In terms of areas of improvement, the survey findings indicated that parents would like the teachers to provide more feedback about their child. These parents would also like to have more opportunities to talk to the teachers



Unlike working on an academic project, we had to deal with greater complexity and real-world considerations, such as finding a right balance between profitability and resource constraints, when making our recommendations to the SME.



so as to better understand their child's performance and progress in school. Another area of improvement was the lack of co-curricular activities for students in the school. Many parents also felt that students could be provided greater access to technology.

LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

The Singaporean students embarked on this project as they were keen to gain overseas work experience with the on-site brand audit in Vietnam. They also hoped to understand the opportunities and challenges that a Singaporean SME faced in an overseas market, and in the process, develop their skills in brand management. As for the Vietnamese students, it was also a chance for them to apply what they had learnt in SMU to their home country.

The students faced a number of challenges in the course of the project. As the Singaporean students pointed out, 'We had to cope with language and cultural differences when communicating with the locals in Vietnam. Therefore, it helped to have three Vietnamese students on the team who could assist with the translation when needed, and to share with the rest of the team about the local business practices in Vietnam.'

The experience of working on the project provided the students with the opportunity to understand the authentic challenges faced by a SME. 'Unlike working on an academic project, we had to deal with greater complexity and real-world considerations, such as finding a right balance between profitability and resource constraints, when making our recommendations to the SME.'

Mr Jorg Dietzel, an experienced professional in this area, was the group's mentor. He provided the students with a clearer sense of direction that the project should take, by explaining how their work would fit into a bigger branding campaign.

At the end of the project, the students appreciated the wonderful opportunity of being involved in this overseas consulting project. They were also grateful to *KinderWorld* for the autonomy that the company gave them in project scoping and analysis, so that the students could deliver a useful proposal to help improve the business of *KinderWorld*.



This project that the students initiated allowed us to focus on developing our business strategies, and to leverage on their research findings to make more accurate business decisions.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

According to *KinderWorld*, 'We were highly satisfied with the reports by the students who spent a great amount of time and effort to conduct an internal brand audit of our company in Vietnam. Through this exercise, we were able to better understand the perception and position of our brand.'

The report also enabled the company to view its brand from a different angle and consequently re-affirmed its decision to proceed with the Brand Pact Initiative, which consisted of a full brand audit and the development of marketing strategies to craft its brand positioning. 'This project that the students initiated allowed us to focus on developing our business strategies, and to leverage on their research findings to make more accurate business decisions,' concluded *KinderWorld*.

Project Advisor: **Mr Jorg Dietzel**

Student
Consultants: **Nguyen Thuy Phuong**
Bachelor of Business Management

Truong Thi Phuong Hanh
Bachelor of Social Science

Phan Cam Van
Bachelor of Business Management

Lum Hui Fen
*Bachelor of Social Science &
Bachelor of Business Management*

Wong Ming Yun
Bachelor of Business Management

Wong Shun Khee Sarah
Bachelor of Business Management

MIND EDGE

Mind empowerment, or rather, ‘driving the Formula One of our mind’ to maximise human potential, forms the core proposition for *Mind Edge*. Established in 2003, *Mind Edge* runs programmes for students, parents and working adults with the aim of training their minds to run faster and sharper, so that they may achieve their peak performance and a greater fulfilment in life. Mr Alan Yip, the company’s head honcho, was Master Trainer of the Singapore team at the World Memory Championships, and the Coach of Singapore’s first and only Grandmaster Norm of Memory. His philosophy for the business is to empower individuals to use their mind as the ultimate winning edge so that they perform at their peak in school, at work, and in life.



PROJECT AIMS

Mind Edge planned to expand its business locally and overseas. To do so, however, they first had to streamline current operations and establish processes so that customers would experience the same professional learning standards and world-class customer service that were expected of *Mind Edge*. This extended across a wide spectrum of customer touch-points, from the time they registered and enrolled for a course, to after-sales service and quality control. This project thus required the student consultants to develop documentation standards, as well as to study and recommend processes to support the company’s expansion plans.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The team began by examining *Mind Edge*’s organisational structure, and interviewing employees on their job roles, functions and responsibilities. This exercise enabled the student consultants to get a sense of how work was being managed around the company. As part of the process, they reviewed job descriptions to uncover job overlaps and identify areas where responsibility and accountability were not clearly spelt out. The key objective was to determine if employee productivity was at its optimal.

The study also highlighted key areas in the company's operations that required greater examination. Referred to as 'pain points' internally, they included dealing with complexities in scheduling, enrolment administration, customer feedback processes and internal communications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to potential operational improvements, the student team developed AS-IS process flowcharts. These charts provided a methodological view of how any employee ought to approach matters of student enrolment, class schedules and feedback management. The step-by-step flowcharts addressed mainly internal operations that were manually intensive. The review of the workflow and the job scope provided *Mind Edge* with a sense of where values could be enhanced. This was especially important when resources were limited.

The AS-IS flowcharts predicted, graphically, various scenarios that might occur in the enrolment process, together with the corresponding actions that employees could follow, even if circumstances were to change. For example, if a customer were to sign up for classes but could not find a suitable time and date to attend lessons, the AS-IS chart would tell the employee to collect a deposit and then to follow up with recommended class timing options for the client within a stipulated time. Scenarios as to when employees should establish contact via email, and scenarios when the contact should be made, preferably by telephone, were also articulated. Besides outlining these processes, the team made an effort to offer suggestions that could enhance productivity. For example, they proposed that class information be provided on the *Mind Edge* website, so that employees may free themselves from attending to straightforward customer enquiries.

On the issue of managing overlapping job responsibilities, the students recommended the use of Suppliers, Inputs, Process, Outputs and Customers (SIPOC) diagrams – a Six Sigma tool that helps to capture the state of the organisation and its processes. SIPOC would allow for a quick assessment of the company's processes, where employees could be brought together – in a non-threatening way – to create the diagram. As they reviewed and gave definition to the various steps involved in a process, they, too, would define and assign roles and responsibilities amongst themselves.



We were able to use tools and techniques taught in class to identify and solve real issues.

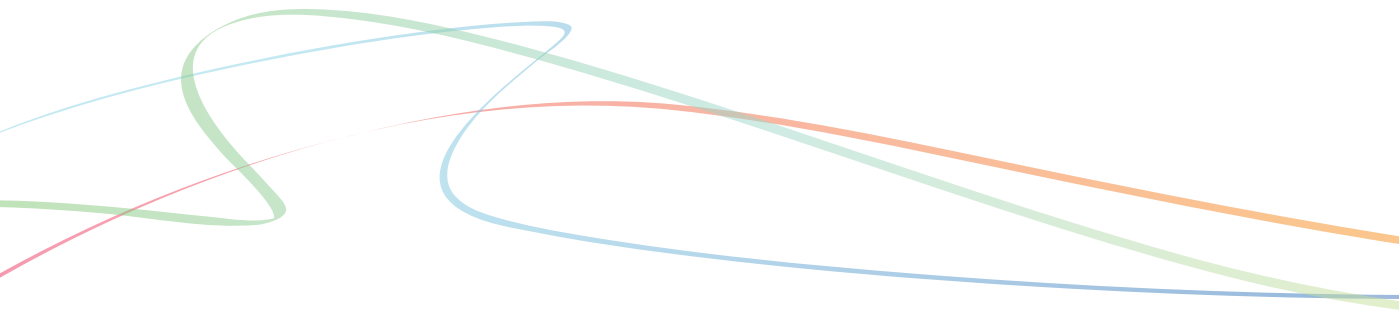


LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

Working on this project enabled the student consultants to reflect on some of the theories that they have studied at SMU. 'We were able to use tools and techniques taught in class to identify and solve real issues,' the students noted. They soon realised, however, that in the real world, the budget was a recurring constraint in the way it set the parameters of how projects were to be conducted.

The experience of being a consultant also highlighted to the students the importance of communication. The expectations of the SME had to be well managed so that the objectives of the project were clear to everyone. The students found that by engaging with the company regularly, they became better at understanding where the company was coming from, and consequently, it became far easier to respond to its needs.

Having an intermediary, in the form of a project advisor, helped tremendously too. 'The students proved themselves to be diligent, intelligent and enthusiastic,' said Practice Assistant Professor Lieven Demeester, the project advisor.





I greatly appreciate the highest level of professionalism and support from the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre and the initiatives and business maturity of the student consultants under the guidance of Practice Assistant Professor Demeester. Thank you for a job well done!



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

A review of internal operations was what *Mind Edge* had required, and they were happy that the student consultants took great effort to investigate and examine the issues that were impeding the company from reaching its maximum potential. *Mind Edge* was especially pleased that the students had designed AS-IS flow charts and SIPOC diagrams as additional values in establishing quality standards that the company could follow. 'The team managed to capture areas of our operational needs succinctly, and helped to map out the work processes with clarity. This has enabled us to make more informed decisions as we scope our expansion plans,' said the company. The students' suggestions, such as setting up a customer-relationship management programme, also inspired the company to think about leveraging on information technology, so that it could become operationally more efficient and provide better service to its customers.

'I greatly appreciate the highest level of professionalism and support from the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre and the initiatives and business maturity of the student consultants under the guidance of Practice Assistant Professor Demeester. Thank you for a job well done!' said Alan Yip, Founder and CEO of *Mind Edge*.

Project Advisor: **Practice Assistant Professor Lieven Demeester**

Student Consultants: **Au Yeong Yuen Mun**
Bachelor of Business Management

Weng Tianle
Bachelor of Business Management

Lim Ming Ying Melanie
Bachelor of Science (IS Management)







PLAYBOX

Playbox is a Singapore-based distributor and exporter of video games software, hardware and accessories. Set up in 2004, the company has been shipping major consoles (like the Sony Playstation, Nintendo and Xbox) to regional countries, including Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, and the Middle East. The sets are offered in brand new, refurbished or used conditions, depending on the needs of customers. The company has been growing at an average rate of about 15% to 20% year-on-year. *Playbox* Distribution Pte Limited also achieved the 74th position in 2009 and the 56th position in 2010 in terms of sales volume in Singapore SME 500, as ranked by DP Information Group.



PROJECT AIMS

With ambitions to expand locally and overseas, *Playbox* needed to ensure that it kept a talented pool of employees to take its business forward. The company had, however, much difficulty attracting fresh recruits. Another concern was the increasing staff turnover rate, especially amongst high-performance employees.

These human resource challenges created problems in productivity, as work demands piled up on the remaining employees. They also drove up recruitment costs, as more time and resources was spent trying to attract and screen candidates. Meanwhile, as the company became larger and more complex, some employees had voiced concerns about the lack of personnel development and internal communication processes. The project was thus aimed at uncovering and resolving the human resource challenges at *Playbox* so as to address pressing matters of recruitment, retention and performance management.

-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Through interviews and surveys across *Playbox*, from technicians to sales representatives, warehouse personnel to the managing director, the team identified key issues that seemed to be plaguing the company. In recruitment, they found that sales positions, in particular, were harder to fill. This was perhaps due to the relatively low monthly base salary that *Playbox* was offering, compared to other sales positions elsewhere. This, the students said, discouraged potential employees from joining the company – even though the company offered a relatively high rate of commission, at 2-3 times of what other companies were offering their sales staff.

Feedback from the interviews also indicated that health benefits were lacking in the company, which usually subsidised less than what it would cost to see a doctor. Employees who compared their health benefits with acquaintances from outside the company would feel that they were at a disadvantage in comparison. Discrepancies in salaries were of some concern as well, as foreigners in the company tended to receive less than their Singaporean colleagues. For a company that hired many Malaysians, this issue had caused many of *Playbox's* Malaysian employees to contemplate job opportunities elsewhere. Additionally, the interviewees highlighted that the company lacked a formal career planning system. As such, employees felt that there were limited career prospects if they continued to stay at the company. Such sentiments had thus contributed to staff turnover.

-RECOMMENDATIONS

A stronger employer brand would help in talent attraction, the students noted. The challenge for *Playbox* in attracting recruits would thus lie, in part, in the company's ability to send clear signals that they were 'worth working for'. For one, *Playbox* could consider revamping its website, which lacked information on what the company did, stood for, and how it took care of its employees. The lack of such information had put the company at a great disadvantage, especially with younger applicants. The students argued that the lack of information on the employer website would signal to potential job candidates, the company's take on communication and transparency.

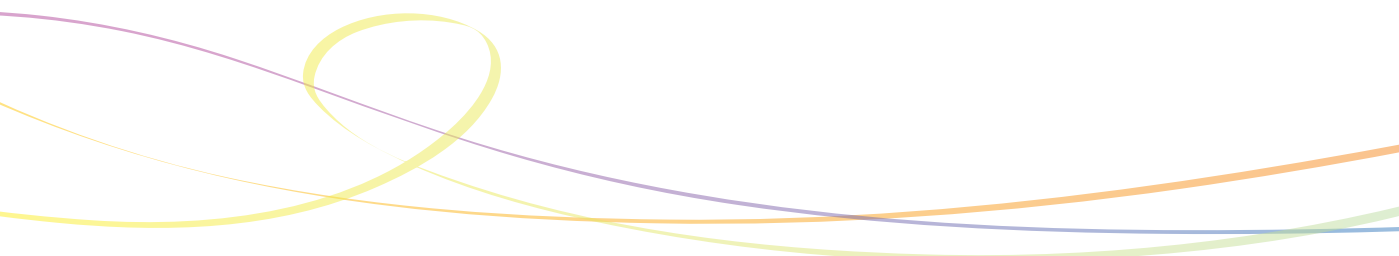
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‘I was most impressed by the resourcefulness of the students,’ she said, noting that these student consultants had worked through holidays, weekends, and busy exam periods to complete the project.

”

To address issues in compensation, the students recommended that *Playbox* tweak its salary structure for sales personnel, so as to offer a higher base and lower variable. The ratio proposed followed a study of wage structures for sales personnel in the financial sector. Though *Playbox*'s sales employees earned higher-than-average salaries overall, the low base had a deterrent effect on talent acquisition – especially amongst those who feared that they may not be good at sales at *Playbox*. Also recommended was an exercise in salary adjustments, so as to ensure that the employees' wages were on par with what other companies were paying. But of course, money alone may not be enough to keep employees motivated.

The students hence suggested some benefits that the company could consider adopting. These included travel benefits, where the top performer of each month would win a vacation paid by the company, and a flexible benefits scheme, where employees may be granted a sum of money each year for medical and dental treatment, as well as for other needs.

As a small organisation that was growing, *Playbox* also needed to put in place some measures of performance management. Here, the students recommended formulating key performance indicators for every employee. This, however, should be executed with some sensitivity as it would take time for every superior and subordinate to learn how jobs should be measured fairly. Performance appraisal systems were also recommended, so that employees could get a sense of how they were faring and their potential career advancement. More importantly, superiors should engage their subordinates more frequently, so as to reinforce good performance and to keep communication channels open. Finally, the students thought that *Playbox* would benefit from a Career Roadmap System (CRS), which would illustrate the value that each department brought to the organisation, as well as highlight how employees could potentially change their portfolio within the company if they wanted to do so. This would give employees a sense of how they may grow and advance their career.

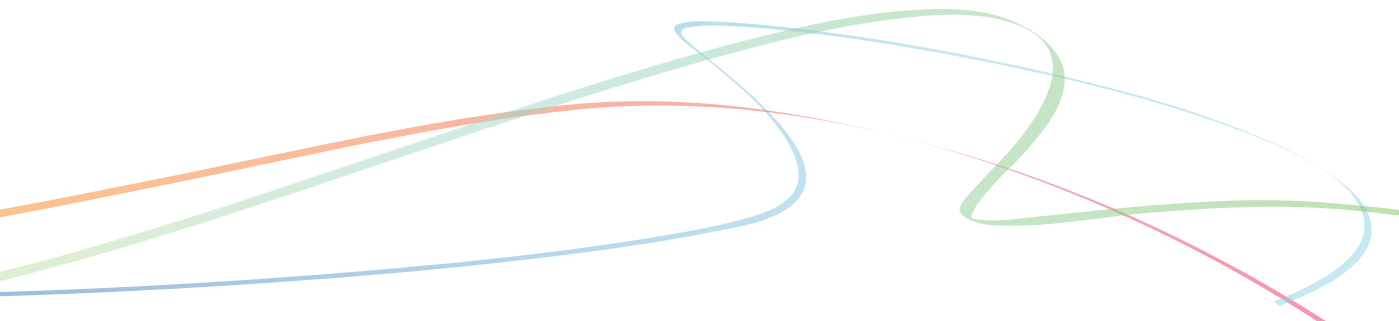


LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

Time was the biggest constraint for the student consultants, who had to complete what could have been a massive study within a ten-week window. Though the project was challenging to manage, the students – majors of the school's Organisational Behaviour and Human Resources (OBHR) track – found fulfilment in the real-life interactions with the client, their project advisor and interview subjects. They were mindful, for instance, that unlike academic projects for school, this proposal had to be realistic and applicable, and that real people's lives could be affected by their study.

The project also gave the students a taste of the real challenges that SMEs were confronted with, especially in hiring the best people to work for them. Employer branding definitely stood out as a key factor, as young graduates fight over job openings at multi-national corporations, due to a perception that these corporations offered better salaries, prospects, benefits and work-life balance. They also learnt that operational costs feature far more prominently at SMEs, compared to large corporations, who may offer large training budgets for employees. As the students pointed out, 'This mindset has contributed to a general misconception that SMEs are less likely to care for their employees.'

Project advisor, Ms Helen Lim, was a great help for the students. A former human resources practitioner, Ms Lim guided the student consultants in deciding how to approach the business problem. She even offered personal professional contacts to the students, so that they could get expert advice on areas that required specialised help. 'I was most impressed by the resourcefulness of the students,' she said, noting that these student consultants had worked through holidays, weekends, and busy exam periods to complete the project.





Many of the recommendations have been useful and applicable for the company. In fact, since the project's completion, some of the students' suggestions have already been incorporated.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

'Many of the recommendations have been useful and applicable for the company,' said *Playbox*. In fact, since the project's completion, some of the students' suggestions have already been incorporated into the company's staff handbook. The company also underwent a wage adjustment exercise earlier in the year, due in part to the findings presented by the students. While the effort put in by the student consultants for their research and proposal was impressive, *Playbox* noted that not all of the academic theories presented could be applied easily. In managing people, perhaps, it was important that changes were handled and moderated sensibly, keeping in check employees' feelings and responses.

The project was initially supposed to be about developing an appraisal and performance-based remuneration system and policy, the company said. With the changes in scope that occurred along the way, the project evolved to capture studies on recruitment, performance management and staff retention. But in the end, all of the issues presented were important and useful for the company's future plans.

Project Advisor: **Ms Helen Lim**

Student **Nur Syahidah Bte Alim**
Consultants: *Bachelor of Business Management*

Debbie Yap Yi Ching
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

Lim Yan Ping, Maxis
Bachelor of Social Science

HSR

HSR is a professional real estate company, the longest established mega real estate company in Singapore since 1980. It was formerly known as Hap Seng Realty but rebranded itself as *HSR* in 1992. Since then, the company aims to be the first choice in real estate.

In 2007, *HSR* was named the 'fastest growing agency' by *SELLING* Magazine, and was the first and only company in the industry to win the prestigious Golden Brand Award. *HSR* also became 'the largest' real estate company in Singapore (according to the Singapore Book of Records), and was considered as the 'best real estate company' by Singapore Property News and the 'Number 1 real estate company' by MLMIA.



HSR THE LARGEST REAL ESTATE COMPANY

-PROJECT AIMS

Being an established company facing an expansion in company operations, *HSR* needed to find a way to reduce waiting time for its property advisors when they visited its head office, and to increase the productivity and efficiency of its customer relationship officers (CRO).

The student consultants were tasked to redesign the company's service process; in particular, they were to find ways to streamline *HSR*'s processes by reviewing the customer service flow. Furthermore, the student consultants were asked to examine the job description of each CRO to consolidate some of their job functions.

-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this project included both qualitative as well as quantitative research.

Qualitative research included one-to-one in-depth interviews with CROs, Administrative Officers and Advisors. Observation research was also conducted to better understand the workflow process of the company during peak periods.



Based on the surveys and interviews conducted, the students discovered that all the respondents saw the need to improve the workflow processes, so as to enhance the efficiency and productivity of the CROs.



Quantitative research included survey questions that were based on the problems faced by the company. In total, 120 respondents took part in the survey, which included team leaders and Advisors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the surveys and interviews conducted, the students discovered that all the respondents saw the need to improve the workflow processes, so as to enhance the efficiency and productivity of the CROs.

The students noted that the Advisors were the ones who disrupted the efficiency of the workflow by not completing the transaction forms accurately or completely. As such, it was important that the various team leaders of the Advisors highlighted the importance of providing complete and accurate information when completing these forms. On top of that, team leaders also had to educate the Advisors by teaching or reminding them how to complete the different types of forms for the different transactions.

The team proposed increasing the number of printers available for the CROs. For example, two CROs could share a common printer instead of having one printer for many CROs. The printer could be located next to the workstations of the CROs, instead of placing it at a distance in the backroom.

Another recommendation was to provide a standardised checklist to the Advisors for the submission of transactions. These checklists could be made easily available to the Property Advisors by placing them in front of the Information and/or CRO counters. This would be convenient for the Property Advisors as it would remind them of the different forms needed for the various real estate transactions. At the same time, the checklist would help to reduce the likelihood of incorrectly-completed or incomplete forms being submitted.

To ease the number of queries raised to the counter staff, the student team suggested that an Information Counter should be established at the reception area of *HSR*. One staff member could be allocated to man this counter and it would be the Advisors' first point-of-contact when they entered the building. In this way, the Advisors would also be efficiently directed to the proper queue. At the same time, a recommendation was made to install a television in the waiting area, so that the Advisors would be able to catch the news or watch a movie while they were waiting for their turn.



The students also appreciated how theories and concepts taught in lessons could be applied to a real-life project. This was after all not another academic assignment to be submitted at the end of the semester, but an authentic research project that would help to shape the processes and practices of a local SME.



LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

During the research process, the students had to liaise with the senior management of *HSR*. This gave them a better understanding of how the property market operated in Singapore.

The students also appreciated how theories and concepts taught in lessons could be applied to a real-life project. This was after all not another academic assignment to be submitted at the end of the semester, but an authentic research project that would help to shape the processes and practices of a local SME.

BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

According to *HSR*, the recommendations proposed by the student consultants were useful and relevant. The company is currently studying the implementation of these recommendations in tandem with other corporate programmes.

Overall, the managers at *HSR* were impressed with the results and findings. The company also indicated that it had learnt much from the project at the same time.

Project Advisor: **Ms Regina Chow**

Student
Consultants: **Teo Wei Ting**
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

Kok Meiting
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

Alison Lim Chang Yee
Bachelor of Science (Economics)

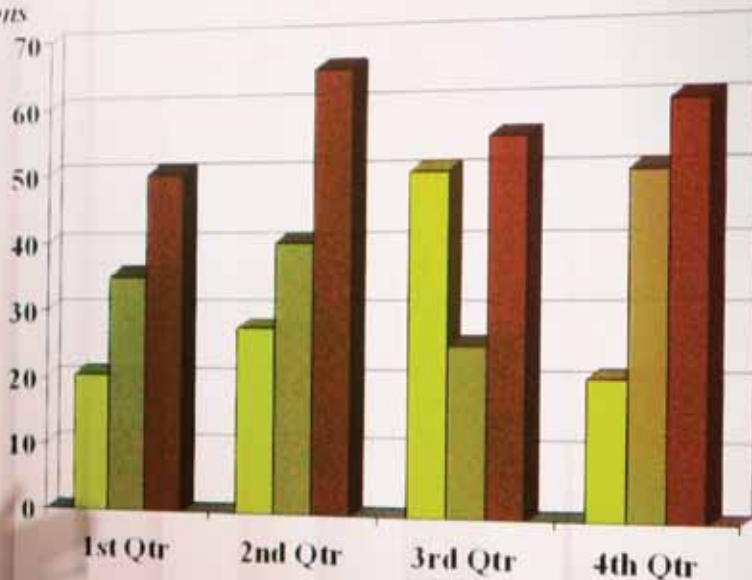




GLOBAL
SALES TRANS

Sales Forecast for Year 2011

Millions



SKIN INC

Skin Inc is a contemporary, innovative, custom-formulated skin solutions brand with a commitment to empower the modern individuals to create their own fuss-free beauty experience. At *Skin Inc*, the entire beauty experience is customised — from its signature range of concentrated essences to its infusion therapy services, all targeted at delivering ingredients to the skin's deeper dermal layer using state-of-the-art, non-invasive technology.

The brand's mission is to provide its customers with a fun and relaxing experience in a modern, all-white, chill-out space, delivering sustainable results that rival invasive procedures.




PROJECT AIMS

While the company has performed well over the last three years, ever since it first opened its doors, the business owners wanted to understand, in detail, how target customers perceived the company and its brand offerings, such as *Oxy Miracle Infusion* and *My Daily Dose™*. This study was important, as it would also affect *Skin Inc's* strategic developmental plans in the near future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Students executed the project in two main stages: first, a brand tracking survey was conducted to measure customers' awareness and perceptions of the 'Skin Inc' brand, following which, a product efficacy study was performed to test customers' views on the products sold by *Skin Inc*, and consequently, how that might affect their purchase decisions.



Regarding consumers' perception of the 'Skin Inc' brand, the students examined three main attributes: (1) prestige, (2) efficacy and (3) approachability. Most consumers agreed that the brand was approachable, followed by effective, and lastly, prestigious. Many of them also recognised 'Skin Inc' as having the expertise to deliver on its brand promise – to empower customers through skincare knowledge and solutions. The focus for *Skin Inc*, however, was to get consumers to realise and experience these brand benefits for themselves, and in doing so, become brand 'converts' and 'evangelists'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The students recommended that the company develop its customer base by reaching out to more consumers via marketing and public relations campaigns.

Product efficacy tests conducted on two *Skin Inc* products, *My Daily Dose™* and *Oxy Miracle Infusion*, yielded mainly positive outcomes. Respondents who sampled *My Daily Dose™* reported improved skin suppleness and brightness. Most satisfied with the product were respondents with sensitive skin types. A majority of respondents also indicated that they would recommend the product to their friends. *Oxy Miracle Infusion* received glowing reviews too, with 95% of respondents reporting hydrated skin, 90% reporting smoother skin, and 88% reporting brighter skin immediately after use. An astounding majority of respondents here indicated that they would recommend the product to their friends.

The project concluded with students urging *Skin Inc* to further examine how customer sentiments towards *Skin Inc* products, like *My Daily Dose™* and *Oxy Miracle Infusion*, might ultimately affect their future purchase behaviour. Understanding this in greater detail would allow the company to shape its marketing strategy, which would subsequently direct its promotional activities.



We wanted to gain first-hand work experience with SMEs, apply our academic knowledge to real-life problems, and find out what it was like to be consultants.

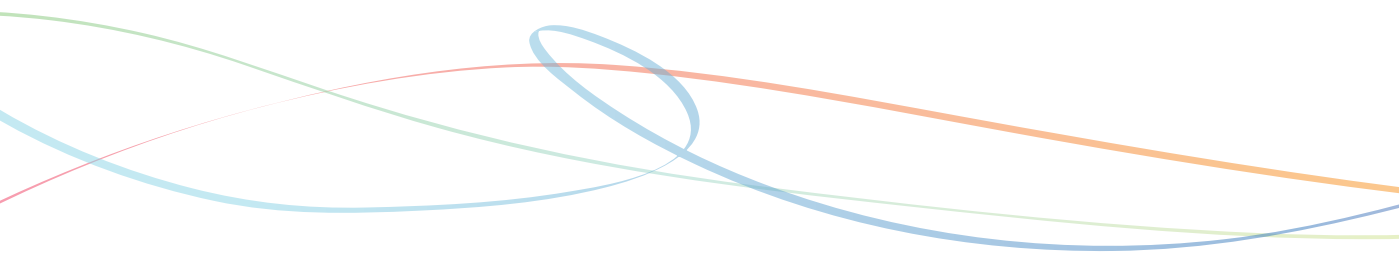


LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

It was critical from the onset to find a 'sweet spot' for the project scope, said project advisor, Mr Terence Yow. This was to ensure that the SME's needs were met while allowing the students to enjoy and benefit from the experience of working on this project. Still, the project turned out to be more complex than both the project advisor and the student consultants had imagined. It was at this juncture that advice from USEA was most helpful, Mr Yow noted. 'USEA staff were very helpful in sharing their experience with similar challenges, and their insights allowed us to realign our project priorities in ways that met the SME's expectations.'

For the students, this project provided a touch of reality to all that they have been learning in marketing classes. 'We wanted to gain first-hand work experience with SMEs, apply our academic knowledge to real-life problems, and find out what it was like to be consultants,' they said. It was not always easy, however, as they had to juggle between personal and class schedules around this project. Beyond time management, the students also found it difficult to source for respondents who were willing to be interviewed. 'Having Mr Yow around as our mentor was most useful,' they said. 'He would always provide useful advice and offer help whenever we encountered roadblocks.'

All in all, the project offered the student consultants a taste of what SME business owners would be most concerned about. 'Working on the project was a very inspiring experience for the team, as we learnt how much effort goes into the setting up of a business, and also, the determination required to overcome the various obstacles in order to achieve success,' they concluded.





It was the students' recommendations that impressed *Skin Inc's* managers the most. 'Their proposal was in-depth, relevant, and applicable to the real world,' they said.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

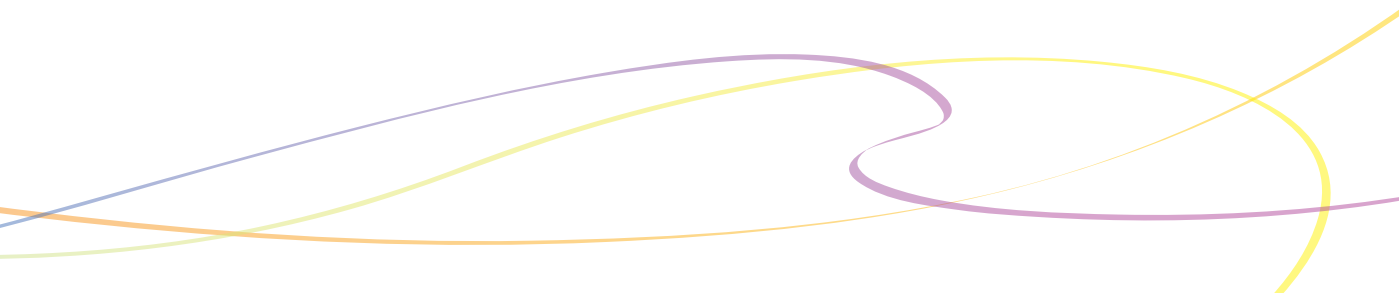
'The students provided many insights for the company through their market research,' noted *Skin Inc*. The company thought that the study of consumer behavioural patterns across the various skincare brands allowed it to better understand the gaps that *Skin Inc* could potentially fill. Through this project, *Skin Inc* also realised the importance of addressing both emotional and rational benefits in branding their products. Ultimately, it was the students' recommendations that impressed *Skin Inc's* managers the most. 'Their proposal was in-depth, relevant, and applicable to the real world,' they said.

Project Advisor: **Mr Terence Yow**

Student **Edmond Lim Chye Kwang**
Consultants: *Bachelor of Business Management*

Aaron Tay
Bachelor of Business Management

Tan Lay Khim
*Bachelor of Accountancy &
Bachelor of Business Management*



WINRIGO

Winrigo (S) Pte Ltd is a firm with an environmentally-conscious outlook that offers innovative and cost-competitive solutions for plastics, transforming plastics waste into eco-label plastic products. Its core technologies are R3plas Eco-label recycled technology, R3plas Oxo-biodegradable technology and R3plas Bio composite technology.

Building on its core competencies of green technology development and sustainable manufacturing, it has also created its own line of consumer products under the brand *L'earth™*. The range of environmental lifestyle products currently consists of bio-composite cutlery, dinnerware, food and drinks containers. With *L'earth™*, going green is simple, enjoyable, and sustainable.

Winrigo was recently awarded the SEC-Senoko Power Green Innovation Awards 2010, the Singapore Packaging Star Award 2010 and the Asia Star 2010 for its new Oxo-biodegradable EVOH barrier film packaging.



PROJECT AIMS

L'Earth™ (pronounced: love) was *Winrigo's* latest line of eco-friendly disposable plastic utensils, made using by-products from Prima (wheat bran and recycled plastics) with the help of R3plas Biocomposite technology.

As the products were newly introduced at the time, the company's then-immediate goal was to drum up awareness for this new brand and its products. For the long haul, the company wanted *L'Earth™* to be a recognised name in the disposable utensils market, differentiated by its environmentally-friendly proposition. The students were thus tasked to develop a marketing plan that would meet these long and short term objectives. But to do so, they must first understand the product, its target customers, its competition, as well as pricing and distribution considerations.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

To understand the market for *L'Earth™*, the team conducted 31 interviews to find out what consumers were looking for when purchasing disposable cutlery, as well as the price that they would be willing to pay. A conjoint analysis was then used to determine the price premium that consumers might be willing to pay for the value-added attributes of the brand, namely, its eco-friendly characteristic as compared to other types of disposable cutlery.

While no significant customer segment was identified through the interviews, it was found that students and working adults over 45 years of age showed a greater inclination towards the purchase of eco-friendly cutlery. People also indicated a tendency to buy such products at supermarkets and stores located in the heartlands of Singapore. For them, price was the most important consideration, followed by quality, eco-friendly attributes, and design.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The team recommended from these findings that *Winrigo* take a mass market approach in its initial marketing push, as there was no significant discernible demographic to target, and therefore, it might be useful to reach as broad a base of consumers as possible at the start. More in-depth research would be necessary for segmentation by psychographic variables, the student consultants concluded.

As for branding the products, several key competitive advantages were highlighted, including how *L'Earth™* made it easier and more convenient to care for the environment, as well as how the products complemented eco-friendly mindsets and lifestyles. To this end, the students proposed that the brand should focus on three main benefits: Simplicity, Enjoyment and Sustainability. 'Simplicity' would demonstrate how easy it was to use the product, and also, the ease with which the product allowed customers to remain environmentally-responsible. 'Enjoyment' would seek to show that the products were a joy to use – perhaps partly because its use had minimal environmental impact. Lastly, 'Sustainability' would emphasise the brand's commitment to delivering a broader promise of an environmentally-conscious way of life.

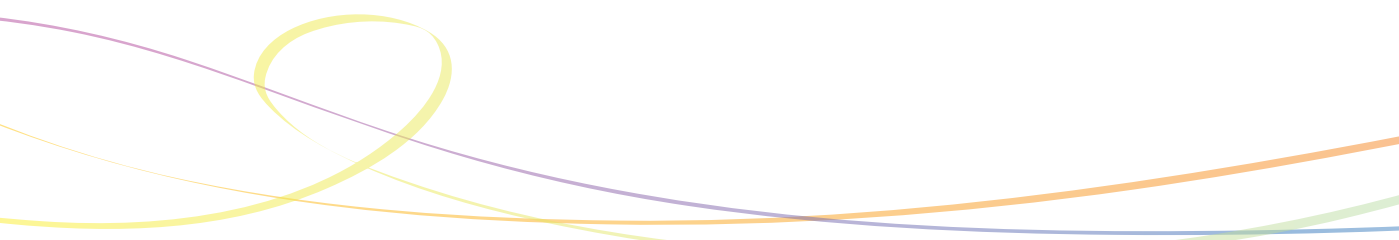


Our deliverables had real business implications, unlike an academic project which usually stops at using the business as a case study.



Beyond simply identifying the core brand elements that would be essential to *L'Earth™*, the students proposed brand logos, slogans, fonts, visuals, and notably, a brand story. The story would convey to consumers the environmental harm caused by reckless use of plastics, as well as the care that went into the making of *L'Earth™* products, such as the use of plant by-products, and the absence of chemicals, glues or toxic substances in its manufacturing processes. Consumers might also be interested to learn how the use of *L'Earth™* products over non-eco-friendly alternatives could potentially reduce carbon emissions and waste. This was recommended by the students because it was felt that consumer education had to be addressed for the products. With more products claiming to be socially conscious, consumer education may reduce potential scepticism related to environmental claims. To that end, the students also suggested promotional and public relations campaigns.

From their research, it was found that consumers in Singapore were willing to pay a premium for 'green' products, over similar 'non-green' counterparts. The students' own calculations from the interviewees showed the level of premium that consumers were willing to pay. With this information, they were able to estimate the cost of each pack of *L'Earth™* products. However, noting consumers' general price sensitivity to such products, it was also suggested that, as a new brand, *L'Earth™* should consider offering free samples and bulk discounts to attract consumers' attention. The company was also advised to engage with key retailers (the supermarkets and heartland stores), so as to possibly secure premium shelf spaces. This may involve offering retailers higher margins, and partnerships for joint promotions/advertisements.





The work of these SMU students far exceeded our expectations. The USEA's approach of employing the help of an experienced project advisor ensured that the proposal was methodological and practical.



LEARNING POINTS FOR STUDENTS

This project was a heartening experience for the student consultants, who were invited following the project's completion, to work with *Winrigo* on executing actual marketing plans for *L'Earth™*. Looking back, however, the students noted some challenges at the start, when they had to scope the work with their client. 'As all of this was on top of our schoolwork, we had to commit extra time to work on this project. However, to better manage the project, we had a series of deliverables plotted against a timeline so as to guide our progress. We also kept each other informed of our busy schedules so that we could then distribute the workload more effectively, and therefore meet the various deadlines,' they said.

While the interviews provided much insight for the project, the students also felt that a greater study, involving surveys and focus groups, might have made their proposal a tad more complete. Time constraints held them back and the students needed to be realistic about what they could achieve within the time frame. But that did not stop them from making sure that their suggestions were realistic for the company. 'Our deliverables had real business implications, unlike an academic project which usually stops at using the business as a case study,' they noted. This was where having a project advisor was most helpful. Fortunately for the team, the advisor shared marketing and communication tips generously. He also facilitated the scoping of the project, and managed the expectations of both the company and student consultants.



BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR THE SME

Winrigo was impressed with the students' proposal. They found that the suggestions made were strongly backed by research, and realistic enough that they envisioned applying and executing many of the recommendations. 'As we had always worked with polytechnic students on such projects, our expectations were based on those past experiences. The work of these SMU students far exceeded our expectations,' said the company. They added that the USEA's approach of employing the help of an experienced project advisor ensured that the proposal was methodological and practical. Inspired by the work presented by the students, *Winrigo* now plans to extend the *L'Earth™* brand to more product categories. The brand was also launched at an international fair in Japan in October 2010.

Project Advisor: **Mr Jeffery Koh**

Student **Ong Shieh Yuan**
Consultants: *Bachelor of Business Management &
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Andre Lim Jin Hui
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the donors for believing and sharing in the vision as well as the values of USEA. The funding has benefited many SMEs and students.

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